

THE FAMILIAR STRANGER

F. E. PENNY

TO THE READER

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The Familiar Stranger

THE East holds many mysteries which are never solved. The occasional disappearance in India of a child of pure European blood is one of them. The twin daughters of a British merchant are orphaned by the death of both parents and are left stranded among strangers in a Native State. By a curious sequence of events they are in the care and under the control of a Hindu woman. When the time comes for the despatch of the children to England, one of the twins is missing. The other reaches her relatives at home in safety. She develops as she grows up a strong will of her own. In trying to manage her love affairs she is led into many difficulties. She is equally unfortunate when her relatives take a hand and endeavour to bring about satisfactory results. After various vicissitudes the right man comes along. It is to be hoped that no mistake has been made in her third choice.

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The Familiar Stranger

by
F. E. Penny

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THE FAMILIAR STRANGER

CHAPTER ONE

(I)

GODFREY BELTON stepped down from the mail train as it stopped at the railway terminus, Madras.

An Englishman pushed his way through the dark-skinned crowd. Ahead of him was a peon before whose badge the Indians gave way instinctively. The polished brass plate bearing the engraved words "Europe Stores" was displayed upon a broad belt of deep green bordered with crimson. A long coat with a white turban completed the peon's uniform, and made of him an imposing figure.

Basil Torrington went straight up to Belton and held out his hand. It was taken by the new arrival with the expression of one who was in ignorance of the identity of the person thus greeting him.

"Mr. Belton? Here you are at last. I hope you are not very tired with your long journey?"

"More dusty than tired," responded Godfrey with a smile.

"You're right. It's a horribly hot and dusty journey from Bombay. However, we will soon make you comfortable. Luggage?"

"Yes, in the van."

"You're alone?"

"I have my wife and child with me. They are still in the carriage."

He turned to the door of the first-class compartment which he had just left. Marjorie had been watching her husband from the deeply shaded carriage window, waiting anxiously and just a little timidly for a summons to descend to the platform. She came to the door. A little voice cried:

"Daddy! Daddy! May we get out?"

"Yes, come along, my pet," was Belton's reply.

Joan, aged six years, lost no time in reaching the platform. She was followed by her mother.

"Welcome to Madras!" cried Torrington, as he clasped her hand. "I have come from our Stores to collect the new Assistant and bring him and his belongings to our Central Depot."

He greeted Joan with a solemn handshake that gave her a sense of importance. She was not troubled with shyness and responded readily. Turning back to Belton, he said:

"You have no servant, of course. Haven't had time to pick up one. We must get a capable man for you soon. I have brought one of our peons to help."

He called up the man who had made a pathway for him through the crowd of Indian travellers. The two Englishmen went towards the van, where already the luggage was being placed on the platform. Under the superintendence of the peon it was sorted out and carried by a gang of railway porters down the long platform to the entrance. A brougham drew up at the spot where Torrington and the new arrivals waited.

"Jump in, Mrs. Belton," he cried. "Let's be off out of this crush of Indians. Now, Belton, in you get!"

Godfrey hesitated, his mind upon his property.

"What about the luggage?" he asked.

"The peon will see to it. He has one of our vans and will come along behind us."

Torrington followed Belton and they left the station yard. A second peon sat beside the coachman. Both were Indians and wore the green-and-crimson uniform of the "Europe Stores." The carriage, spick and span, was new or nearly so.

"It is very nice, being met like this and carried off so comfortably," remarked Belton gratefully. "Whose brougham are we using? I see that it is private."

"It is your own, and the two men on the box are to be your own servants."

"Ours?" cried Mrs. Belton, startled out of her silence.

A faint colour swept into her delicate face. Torrington glanced at her with approval, thinking that Belton had done well for himself in bringing out a pretty woman of pure English blood as his wife. He wished that he had done the same for himself. He had come to India a bachelor and married a country-born. If he wished for a wife, it had seemed the only way to obtain one. Mrs. Torrington was a good helpmeet according to her lights, but her black eyes and dusky complexion and her glib use of the vernacular when

she lost her temper with her servants betrayed her mixed blood.

"Yes, Mrs. Belton. The brougham is for the use of your husband at Bellary, and here in Madras as long as you are with us. The two men who will go with it are good servants. The peon is a useful man indoors and out. His chief job is going messages and acting as door porter. It is too hot to live behind closed doors as we do in England. He maintains the master's privacy."

"Where are you taking us?" asked Belton, his thoughts upon possible hotel expenses.

"To the residential quarters of the employees of the firm. But you won't be detained long at headquarters. You have come out to take charge of one of our Branches, which we are establishing at Bellary, a big civil and military station between this and Hyderabad. Bellary is in British India, but not far from native territory."

The carriage pulled up before a huge block of buildings. In the centre of the pile was the main entrance of the Stores. The arrangement was very much like that of one of the large emporiums in London, except for the fact that there were no shop-windows with an attractive display of goods. The glare and heat of the tropical sun made it impossible to expose delicate goods to the light.

At the side of the central block was a wing containing several flats, where the employees lived. It was here that Torrington introduced the new-comers to their temporary quarters, which consisted of a furnished flat in the shape of a service suite of rooms.

"Splendid!" exclaimed Belton as he glanced round.

"Delightful!" added his wife.

"It is lent temporarily," explained Torrington. "In a week or ten days you will be off to Bellary."

"Are we to have similar quarters there?" asked Marjorie.

"I am afraid not. The residential wing is in course of building, but it will be some time before the annexe will be habitable. We are pushing on the business part, so as to be able to run the emporium which is much needed."

"Where shall we be living?" asked Marjorie, more interested in matters that concerned them personally than in the firm's prospects.

"There's a decent bungalow in a corner of the land leased by the firm, which has been repaired and put into good order.

We have partly furnished it. I think you will find it very comfortable, far more so than the restricted rooms of a flat. You will be able to have a garden there which it is impossible to have here."

"I'm sure that we shall be very happy," she said, as she smiled at Torrington.

"That's right!" he cried, with warm approval of her readiness to be pleased with everything. "Make up your mind to be happy. It's just as well to be satisfied with what you can get, and not worry about what you would like."

They were standing in the big hall at the entrance of the flats.

"The refreshment-room is along the passage. You sign for your meals and the bill comes in weekly. The place is run on economic lines by the firm, which purchases at wholesale prices and gives us the benefit."

Marjorie was turning into her new home when Torrington stopped her.

"One moment, Mrs. Belton. You can't get on in this climate without your personal servants. They should be here waiting for your approval. Where's that ayah?"

He called to one of the many peons who were on duty. In answer to his summons a middle-aged woman dressed in a white muslin *sari* came forward.

"Where's the boy?"

"Here, sir!" was the reply, as a smart, well-set-up manservant presented himself.

(2)

"These are your two head servants," said Torrington. "The man is named Raju. He knows his business. If you are not satisfied, you tell me."

"Please, sir, I do proper for the new master," promptly put in Raju.

"You will 'spoil my name' if you fail me." Torrington turned to Belton. "I've known this man for some years. He will be as good as his word. The ayah's name is Mariama—in English, Mary woman. She and Raju belong to the Roman Catholic Church, like most of our house servants. She is familiar with the part of the country to which you are

going. She was in the service of a married officer stationed at Secunderabad, one of the British military stations near Hyderabad. She stayed there till the family went home on leave. She, too, knows her work and has very good character 'chits.' "

Joan was regarding the brown face of her future nurse with wondering eyes, a very different personage from the country girl in Norfolk who had served as "general" in the small house at Yarmouth that had been their home. The woman smiled and held out her hands to the child, inviting confidence.

"Come, little missie, come and speak to old ayah," her voice gentle and her manner friendly.

Slowly the child advanced until she was within reach of Mariama. The ayah touched her softly on the shoulder and moved her hand caressingly down the little figure. The touch conveyed reassurance, and Joan allowed herself to be brought into close contact with the soft folds of muslin, which smelt of sandalwood. Torrington was speaking again.

"When you get to Bellary, Mrs. Belton, you will have to cater for yourselves. We haven't had time to establish a restaurant in the new building there. It is coming. Meanwhile our employees have to fend for themselves."

"I suppose there's no difficulty about it?"

"It is much easier to get a good staff of servants in this country than in England nowadays, I understand. One advantage about Indian housekeeping is that you do not feed your servants. They provide for themselves out of their wages. All you are responsible for is to give them house room, which they find in the outbuildings at the back of the bungalow. Raju may be depended on for choosing a cook, and the ayah will see that you have a decent woman called a sweeper who is practically a housemaid in charge of the bedrooms."

"It all sounds easy and as if we ought to be very comfortable," remarked Belton, who had been listening.

"As far as living goes, it is."

"Are there any snags?" he asked, detecting a reservation in the remark.

"Yes, there's the sun to be taken into consideration," said Torrington as his eyes rested on the little girl. "You must all three have sun topees and wear them. But even with the pith hat you must 'ware sun from ten in the morning

till four o'clock in the afternoon. The ayah will have enough to do to see that the little person doesn't expose herself."

"Any other drawbacks?" pursued Belton.

Torrington hesitated. He was anxious that they should not imagine themselves in a paradise. Yet he had no desire to damp their ardour and destroy the contentment that they were inclined to feel.

"You may find it a bit lonely when the novelty wears off."

"I thought you said that Bellary was a large station?"

"The third largest in the Presidency."

"There must be heaps of people from whom one can choose one's friends."

Torrington smiled a little ruefully.

"Crowds of them, military, railway and the civilians in the Government services. But they are all in watertight compartments. There is a large community of country-born people, engaged chiefly as clerks in the different departments. Then there are the staff-sergeants, besides the non-commissioned officers attached to the regiments. In time we shall have our own little lot belonging to the firm. But, sad to say, there is no tendency to mix socially. Even in the close preserve of the Europe Stores we have our classes, and the line is drawn more rigidly than it ought to be."

"That seems all wrong," said Mrs. Belton. "All Europeans should be friends."

"Of course it ought to be so," agreed Torrington, not looking too happy over these revelations which he felt bound to make. "The pukka British out from home keep to themselves. The clerks of mixed blood will have absolutely nothing to do with their fellow-workers who are Indians. Even the classes I have mentioned are subdivided for various reasons, excellent in their own eyes."

"It seems odd with a colony of English-speaking exiles, thousands of miles from home, that they should not be more friendly," remarked Belton. "Can you account for it?"

"Tastes, habits, possibly the difference that is to be found in the source from which they draw their pay. The first two, civil and military, receive their wages from Government, and are subject to Government rules. Our employers are also British, but they are a private firm subject to the rules of a Board of private individuals. However, you will find out in time how you stand and choose your own friends according to taste."

The peon who had been left in charge of the luggage at the station appeared.

"Everything done—come, sir," he said, addressing Torrington.

"Where are you putting the boxes?"

The peon looked at Belton for instructions. By the advice of Torrington, only those packages required for immediate use were brought into the flat. Those not needed until they finally settled down at Bellary were placed in one of the storerooms.

"Don't unpack more than is absolutely necessary for present needs," counselled Torrington. "In a week's time you will be off to your permanent appointment."

"I wish we were staying here," said Mrs. Belton with a little sigh. She was very tired of travelling, although she had not been obliged to rough it.

"We should be glad to have you with us," replied Torrington warmly.

"I knew all along that I was to go up-country," said Belton, who was anxious that the other should not be left under the impression that he shirked pioneer work. "Bellary was mentioned definitely when I was engaged by the Board in London. In addition, the secretary, in speaking about my work, warned me that I might have to move on to some other station if I was needed."

"That's so," responded Torrington. "What is more, you will be in a better position where you are going than any of us down here. We are assistants. You will be boss manager at Bellary or anywhere else you may go, top-dog of the lot. It's a responsible position with every chance of making good for a man who has push and energy."

"Godfrey will do that, I am sure," said his wife confidently. "He is a good organizer."

"So much the better! He will have plenty of scope for that where he is going. Between ourselves, we hope before long to get a firm footing in Hyderabad itself, the capital of the Nizam's dominion, and establish a Branch there. The jumping-off place will be from our new Store in Bellary."

"Why are you so anxious to get a footing in Hyderabad?" asked Mrs. Belton.

"The old town is full of rich men who have nothing to spend their money on but such goods as we offer them. We want to scoop in some of the wealth of the city. We shall

give good value for their money, which they will appreciate. In the lawless old days it couldn't be done; but in these times if trade can get going, there is a fine harvest for the speculator."

"Give me the chance, and I don't see why I should not be the man to capture it for you," rejoined Belton, with the confidence that was natural to him.

"Good! That's the right spirit!" Torrington glanced at his watch. "I must be off. If you come with me, Belton, I'll show you where I can generally be found. Mrs. Belton, you must have some tea. Raju will bring you a tray from the restaurant. Boy!" he called.

Raju came running and took the order. Torrington departed with Belton to introduce him to the business part of the establishment. At the end of a couple of hours Godfrey returned. Marjorie ran to greet him.

"Darling! I was beginning to think that you were lost! I am afraid the tea is cold."

"I've had tea with Torrington. He has taken me all over the place. It's huge. It's magnificent! The finest thing in up-to-date stores I've ever seen. It provides everything from safety-pins and tinned asparagus to machinery and road vehicles."

"I wish we were going to stay here," said Marjorie once more.

"I don't. He was right when he said that I shall be a bigger boss where we are going than if I remained here."

"What is Mr. Torrington?"

"Assistant Manager of one of the departments. It was very good of him to come and meet us. By the by, he has invited us to dine with him and his wife at the restaurant this evening. Dinner is at eight o'clock. Get out your prettiest frock and look your best. He hopes to introduce us to most of the staff."

"Indians as well as English?"

"Only the English and the best of the country-borns."

"Darling!" cried Marjorie, full of happy anticipation. "This is all too lovely for words! You warned me that I might have to rough it, but I don't see at present where the roughing comes in. We had a delightful voyage out on the P. & O. It was second-class, but I am sure that it was as comfortable as first, and the passengers were very sociable. We travelled down from Bombay in a first-class saloon

carriage that we had all to ourselves, and now here we are being treated as if we were honoured guests."

"It does look good," agreed her husband. "But remember this. We are only at the beginning of things. There may be snags."

"Anyway, we have come across none so far," replied Marjorie, whose optimism carried all before it and dispelled every doubt about the future.

"Glory be—!" responded her husband.

She ran off to grapple with her luggage and get out the new dress for evening wear. When she chose it in the Yarmouth stores, she wondered if she would ever have occasion to put it on. Here she was actually discovering that it was to be the first of all her fine feathers to be displayed.

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CHAPTER TWO

(I)

GODFREY was the third son of Benjamin Belton. His two elder brothers were named Richard and Clement.

Old Ben was a yeoman farmer of East Anglia, a man who cultivated his own land, although he was the son of a comparatively rich man whose wealth consisted of corn, cattle and fertile land. As a lad, Benjamin had been removed from a grammar school at the age of fifteen to learn the trade of his ancestors. One of his first lessons was how to draw a furrow with a couple of sturdy Suffolk punches. At sixteen he could compete successfully with most of the ploughmen on the estate. He gave an equally good account of himself when it came to pitching a load of hay, or following the king of the harvest in the corn field.

A tale he was fond of telling to the younger generation concerned the ploughing of one of his father's fields. It was by the side of the road. A neighbouring squire, not yet taxed out of existence, stopped his mail phaeton and watched the young man at work. As Benjamin completed his last furrow the squire called to him.

Ben leaned over the closely-clipped quickset hedge that divided the field from the road and touched his cap. The squire did not recognize him.

"Yes, sir, did you want me?" inquired Ben.

"That's as straight a furrow as I have ever seen drawn, my man. Here's a shilling for you."

The groom handed the shilling over the hedge with a grin. He knew the young yeoman by sight. Ben took it solemnly and touched his cap again. He had the shilling pierced and hung it on his watch-chain. He used to laugh and say that it was the only money in honest cash that he ever earned.

Benjamin inherited the estate and followed in his father's footsteps. He brought up his sons to the same calling and in the same way. They left school at the age of seventeen and took their places among the older men, who were able

to teach them all that was necessary for them to become expert agriculturists.

The estate consisted of three thousand acres, a thousand of which was rich marsh land, well drained, and walled against the inroads of the sea. The rest of the land was meadow and arable, with some fine coverts for game interspersed. Benjamin maintained his father's method of cultivation. Land is honest. "What you put into it, you will get out of it," he used to say, as he dressed his fields liberally from his cattle-sheds. His neighbours called it "high farming," which it was.

Benjamin and his wife lived comfortably if not luxuriously at the Old Hall, standing in a small park of about forty acres. The boys, Richard, Clement and Godfrey, learned to be good shots. They hunted with the harriers and were never without their well-bred greyhounds ready for coursing in the autumn and winter months. Their hunters and dogs were known in the sporting world and did not change hands except at a profit.

In spite of hard times for the agriculturist, old Ben was able to put by money. This he used in building a bungalow town on that portion of his estate which ran down to the coast. He owned a couple of miles of sea front which was acquiring increasing value as a site for a seaside resort.

The bungalows let throughout the summer and autumn. The applications for accommodation were more than he was at first able to satisfy.

In addition to a good sea frontage of cliff and sandy shore beyond, the place was within easy reach of the Broads, which added to its popularity in the eyes of those who had holiday-makers to amuse.

Benjamin chose Godfrey, his third son, to be his house agent. When the boy left school at sixteen, he entered the office of an estate agent to learn the business. At eighteen he took over the agency at Beltonville, the name chosen by the old man for his new enterprise.

There was one daughter, Olive by name. When she was twenty-seven, her father built a square, solid house a little way back from the bungalows and established his daughter in it. She was to run it as a boarding-house or private hotel, with a staff chosen by him. Godfrey was her first lodger.

They became close and confidential chums and devoted to each other.



Then Godfrey fell in love. His two elder brothers showed no inclination to marry and set up for themselves. Mrs. Belton's friends told her that she made her sons far too comfortable to get them out of the old home. With their shooting and fishing, hunting and coursing, together with the work they liked, they desired nothing more of life.

With their father one or other of them attended Norwich market, where they bought and sold cattle, sheep and pigs. The cattle did well on the rich marsh land lying between the Broads and the sea, where the sea had eroded the low cliffs of friable soil. Turned out to graze during the summer, they grew firm and fat. They were driven up to their stalls in the autumn to be further fattened on oilcake and beetroot, and were ready for killing by Christmas.

Godfrey's love-affair did not run smoothly. He met Marjorie in Yarmouth, where she was working for her living as a waitress in a tea-house that catered for the visitors and trippers to the seaside. He and Olive went frequently to Yarmouth on shopping expeditions. They were in the habit of going to this particular restaurant for a good substantial tea before facing the drive to their home. The keen air of the eastern counties gave them both sharp appetites. It usually fell to Marjorie's lot to serve them. Olive made friends with the pretty girl who brought them home-made bread and cakes and damson jam, a weakness of Godfrey's.

Before long he lost his heart to her. He was encouraged by Olive, who thought it an excellent plan that he should start a home of his own in one of the little up-to-date bungalows that were ever increasing in number along the cliffs.

In due course Godfrey broached the subject to his father. To the surprise of the whole family, the old man took it badly. It was not that he objected to his son setting up house for himself. It was the girl to whom he took exception.

"What!" he cried explosively. "One of my sons marry that girl! Not if I know it!"

"But, Dad, there's nothing wrong with Marjorie White," protested Olive, who liked Marjorie for the girl's own sake. She was quite ready to back her brother's choice.

"Everything is wrong with those Whites. They're a bad lot!"

"Have you ever met Marjorie?" asked Olive.

"No, and don't want to."

"Then you can't give an opinion about her," said Godfrey, flushing hotly.

"I can give an opinion about her family," blustered the old yeoman. "And it isn't my opinion only. It's held by everybody who has come across her father, Tom White of the 'Spotted Cow.' He's a publican, more often drunk than sober."

"I'm not marrying the father," remarked Godfrey quietly.

"No, and you're not marrying the daughter, either, if I can prevent it."

"I'm old enough to know my own mind and to have my own way," said Godfrey with decision.

The son was not without his share of the old man's obstinacy, and his father knew it. Godfrey lifted his head and stuck out his square Saxon chin inherited from his forbears. Benjamin recognized the gesture. It did not tend to soften matters.

"All I can say is that if you bring that girl into the family, you and she can pack up your traps and be off to the end of the earth, and be damned to you!"

"Very well, sir. You must look for another agent for the letting of your bungalows," rejoined Godfrey quietly. He was determined that he would not lose his temper with the angry old man.

"All right! All right! Hand over to Clement to-morrow."

"Not me, Dad, please!" cried Clement, startled. "I know nothing of estate agency work. My job is what you put me to when I left school, plain farming and stock-raising."

"Then Richard will have to run the business."

"No, thank-ye," responded Dick firmly. "The cattle market and Norwich Hill is my business, and I am not going to give it up for anybody."

Richard and Clement both rose to their feet and prepared to leave the room. Geoffrey's matrimonial venture was not their affair, and they had no desire to be mixed up in it if it meant a quarrel with their father. They were peaceful men, as are most men who live by the land.

"Here! you two, together! Just you set down again till we've finished this business," said the head of the family, who was feeling the reins slipping out of his hands. In his agitation he dropped into the colloquial language of his youth. Traces of it still remain to this day when the master is among his men on the land.

"No use wasting time discussing the estate agency business with us. It is not our job. You will have to find a man in Yarmouth," said Richard.

"Better keep Godfrey. You won't replace him in a hurry," remarked Clement, as he followed his brother out of the room.

"Chuck it, Godfrey," said his father in a more conciliatory tone.

"I don't break faith with anyone, least of all with a woman," was the reply.

"There are plenty of pretty girls to choose from about here if you want a wife, girls of your own standing. You need not go down to a low-class publican's daughter."

Godfrey remained silent, his lips compressed and his eyes meeting his father's steadily.

"There are the Palmer girls, the Simpsons, the Blacks, within easy reach. Any one of them will say 'yes,' I'll be bound, if you play up."

"Thanks, but I have made my choice, and it's Marjorie White," replied his son evenly.

Old Ben burst out again with apoplectic violence. "Then you can go to the devil and take her with you!"

"Right, sir! We'll be off together," replied Godfrey with a grim smile.

"Father! Father!" protested Mrs. Belton, who was in tears. "We have always been such a happy family, and no one could wish for three better sons that you've got."

"We shan't be a happy family any longer if that drunken scoundrel's daughter is brought into it," remarked her husband.

"Marjorie will refuse absolutely to enter the family if she is not welcomed," said Godfrey. "I'll hand over the books to-morrow morning," he added.

"And what are you going to do for a living?" demanded Belton. "You're no good on the land. You can't even draw a furrow. I doubt if you could pitch a load of hay."

"No need for your sons to use a pitch-fork," said Godfrey quietly.

"But they must know how it's done," barked the old man at him.

"I shall find work all right," said his son confidently. "I've got a little money saved. I'll put up the banns and have them called next Sunday as ever is. Marjorie and I will get married the day after the last call."

He spoke as smoothly as though he was planning a railway journey. His evenness of temper only served to infuriate his father, who would have felt more satisfaction if his son had shown a little irritation.

Old Ben swung out of "the parlour" where the stormy discussion had taken place. The yard collie came up to his master with a trustful wagging of the tail to receive the usual invitation to go for a walk round the sheds. He was rewarded with a curse that sent him whimpering to his kennel.

The hands busy about their various jobs, placing fodder ready, raking out the yards and pigsties, cleaning stables and cattle-sheds, slipped out of sight. They had heard their master's voice through the open window and had recognized the tone of it. Something had put him out, and they could guess what it was. Tongues had been busy about Mr. Godfrey's love affairs, and old Tom White when he had drunk his beer had not been silent on the subject of his daughter's prospects. Godfrey was popular in the old home, and one and all were sorry for him.

It was well known that the master had no love for Tom White. Belton believed that he had been over-reached in the sale of a sow by Tom, who swore to the age of the animal as being only eight years, when it was nearly double, and reported to be getting past maternal cares. The poor thing was suffering more from a low diet than age. She mended her ways when she had spent a little time on the Old Hall estate.

The innkeeper was frequently under the wind, and in any condition, drunk or sober, was a foul-mouthed person who consorted with the lowest. It was on this account that Marjorie had fled from home and found work in the tea-shop at Yarmouth. No doubt existed in the minds of the farm hands that trouble must be looked for when the master learnt in which direction his son's fancy leaned.

(2)

Mrs. Belton and Olive wept together as father and sons disappeared. They determined to stand by Godfrey and see him through it. Without a hint of their intentions to the master of the house they were present at the very quiet wedding that took place at the little country church of

Higham. When it was over they went to the boarding-house, and the health of the happy pair was drunk.

Godfrey and his bride wasted no time. They took the midday express for London and spent a wonderful ten days seeing the sights. At the end of their holiday they came back to Yarmouth, where Olive had found them a small house which Mrs. Belton furnished from her hoard of egg, fowl and butter money, always the perquisite of the farmer's wife.

In a short time Godfrey secured an engagement in a large general stores in Yarmouth which was rising into popularity. It was a period when the small retail shops were being bought up by firms which were following the example of the Co-operative Stores, springing up in London and the big towns.

Godfrey soon advanced from merely serving at the counter and became shop-walker. His experience as house-agent had taught him a good deal. His value was recognized, and he found himself in charge of one of the numerous departments.

Always ambitious, he turned his eyes further afield in search of a wider scope for his talents. Through the interest of one of the directors of the firm in which he was serving, he secured the desired opening in the big Europe Stores that were developing their business in Madras.

He and Marjorie had been married some years when the change came. They had one child, Joan, the darling of her Grannie and Aunt Olive. Very reluctantly these two parted with the child, at present the only one of her generation.

Richard and Clement were disinclined to follow their brother's example. Old Ben's behaviour towards Godfrey was not encouraging. He resolutely held aloof from his youngest son and nursed his wrath, refusing to be reconciled. Yet he took care to inform himself how matters were going. Now and then he heard a young voice in the old house. He knew to whom it belonged. When occasionally he caught sight of the little fairy figure dancing through the passages he made no remark. On the other hand he took care not to do anything to frighten away the sprite. He wished that she had been a boy. In that case he might have stretched a point and held out his hand, for he badly wanted to see an heir of the second generation.

Godfrey, up to his eyes at work in the shop at Yarmouth, had no time to think of family differences. He contented himself with the fact that his sister and mother had not allowed of any breach. They fell in love with Marjorie and

sought her in her own little home where she and Godfrey were supremely happy. It so happened that, although Joan was often borrowed by Aunt or Grannie, her parents did not visit at the Hall. They did not care to run the risk of meeting the old man and perhaps being insulted instead of welcomed. Nor would Godfrey go where his wife was not wanted.

Belton was not told of the new appointment which would take his son out of England until three or four days before they sailed. If he had invited the couple to come and see him the invitation would have been gladly accepted. It was for him to make the move. He remained silent and unfriendly.

"Go and see your father without me," urged Marjorie, her gentle spirit grieved at the breach in the family.

"I won't," replied her husband with the obstinacy that was in his blood. "It was hard enough to listen quietly when he spoke of you before you were my wife. Now if he spoke slightingly of you——"

So they sailed for the East, and Norfolk knew them no more.

CHAPTER THREE

(I)

GODFREY and his wife found themselves comfortably established at Bellary. The move was effected with an ease that astonished Marjorie, accustomed as she was to give substantial help with her own hands when anything of the kind was being done. The day after she arrived Raju had gathered round him a staff of satisfactory servants, such as are still to be met with in the southern Presidency, although there is a greater scarcity in these days than formerly. Education has been far-reaching in India, and the sons of the butlers and head boys no longer look to domestic service for a competent living. The ambition of every schoolboy is to enter a government office. His object is not difficult to attain, and domestic service is left for the enterprising son of the village ryot. It is preferable to driving his father's buffaloes in the primitive plough through the swamped rice fields.

Mariama proved a good nurse to Joan as far as ministering to her personal needs went. But the child was high-spirited and often escaped from the nursery to get into mischief.

One day the ayah and her charge suddenly appeared before Mrs. Belton. Marjorie was busy directing the dirzee in cutting out some new frocks for Joan. The child was hot and excited. In her arms she held a black kid that, with its long legs, was almost too much for her to carry.

"Miss Joan very naughty girl, ma'am. Running away from poor old ayah. Pushing goat boy into prickly pear. Taking boy's stick and driving goats round the compound——"

"Oh, Joan! Joan!" cried her mother, leaving the tailor to his own devices.

"But, Mummie, I wanted a kid for my very own. I caught it myself."

"Yes, ma'am, and the mother plenty angry. Pushing Miss Joan down in the dust and making all dirty!" continued the ayah.

"It didn't hurt, only a little. I kicked its nose and held

on to my dear little kiddy. Then the goat boy came back and drove off the mother. He wanted to take the kiddy away from me, but I hit him in the face and ran away with the little black darling. I may keep it, mayn't I, Mummy?"

"Goat boy say must pay," said the ayah, seeing that her mistress was weakening in the face of her little daughter's pleading.

"What does he want?"

"One rupee. Plenty too much asking for black kid. This only common sort, devil kid."

"What's a devil kid?" asked Mrs. Belton.

"A young goat for the devil. Come Christmas these heathen country people chop off head and the devil drinks the blood."

"Can I see it chopped off, Mummie?" Joan turned to the ayah. "What does the blood taste like? Is it sweet?"

"Not nice talk, missie," protested the ayah.

"May I keep the dear little kiddy?" Joan pleaded, until for very peace's sake, Marjorie gave the ayah the rupee for the goatherd.

The kid was tied up in the veranda that opened on the garden from the suite of rooms containing the day and night nurseries with bathroom. The goatherd was ordered by Raju to bring it the necessary fodder and to keep the place clean. He also had to be in attendance when Joan took her morning walk round the compound to lead it. The little animal was too much for Joan to control.

The next creature to attract her attention was a duck belonging to the kitchen woman. Joan chased it, and the ayah chased Joan. It was captured and dragged to the veranda, where it barely escaped strangulation in the tug for possession that ensued between the child and the owner. Joan held on to the scraggy neck and the kitchen woman to the splay feet.

Hearing the commotion, Mrs. Belton went round to the nursery veranda, where she found an obstinate little daughter, the flustered and protesting owner of the duck, and the angry ayah.

"Can't stop here any longer! I go!" said Mariama. "Too much plenty running!"

"Nonsense, ayah! You're not going. Miss Joan must behave better. Joan! Do you hear?" and she delivered a long lecture while the ayah recovered her breath.

"Give that old devil a rupee," said Joan, pointing to the

kitchen-woman as her exhausted mother ceased her lecture.

"It's the kitchen-woman. You mustn't call her that!"

"Ayah calls her an old devil when she is late with the hot water for my tub. She is an old devil, because she's so black. I know she is!"

The rupee was produced, and the aggrieved kitchen-woman retired, salaaming and clasping her money to her breast. The bird was worth a quarter of a rupee, being only half-grown and not fully fledged. The duck was tied by the leg to the balustrade of the veranda, and the next morning it had to take its place in the morning walk procession.

Joan's next exploit was to capture an old fowl. She had as usual escaped from her attendant and had raced to the kitchen door. Here she found the market boy who had just returned from the daily marketing, with the cook. The boy was guarding a large, flat, round basket. It contained the joint for the day and parcels of various ingredients required for the cooking—half a dozen eggs and a vegetable as well. The heap was surmounted by an old hen that was still in good health. It was destined for the making of chicken broth and cutlets for Joan. The fowl was tied by the legs and quite helpless.

Joan seized it and scampered off. "Mummie, Mummie!" she cried. "See what I have found! A poor, poor hen! Cook has tied its legs. I'm going to keep it for my very own. Dear duckie is so lonely without someone to play with!"

"This very naughty girl!" panted the ayah. "Cook very angry can't make chicken cutlets."

"Don't want chicken cutlets to-day," pronounced Joan. "Tell him I want mutton cutlets and tomatoes for my dinner. There's plenty of red, bloody meat in the basket for cutlets and a heap of tomatoes."

"Oh, Joan! Joan! What am I to do with you?" cried Marjorie in despair.

"Must get young girl to run after missie. Can't stop here," moaned the ayah, putting the corner of her *sari* to her eyes.

These depredations of her unprincipled little daughter were beginning to trouble Marjorie. Something would have to be done to keep the child under better control. The ayah was not strong enough to command obedience. With each success Joan's wilfulness became less easy to combat, and Mrs. Belton was at her wit's end to know what was best to be done.

She must seek advice. When English children grew beyond the control of the ayah what did the mothers do?

Torrington had been quite correct when he hinted that social conditions left much to be desired. Two of the Europeans brought out to serve in the Bellary branch of the Stores were single men. Two others sent up from Madras as the business rapidly increased brought their wives, who were country-born and who knew nothing of domestic conditions in England.

Godfrey had purchased a light Victoria for the use of his wife, and a horse, so that she should not be obliged to look to the brougham for air and exercise. Every evening she drove out with Joan and the ayah in attendance.

The country was rocky and overgrown with cactus and thorn bushes, but the roads, if dusty, were good. They did not offer much variety, but the air was fresh and cool when the sun was going to its setting and had lost some of its fierceness.

There were tennis courts near the Stores block of buildings where the men played. The wives usually preferred to sit and watch the play. After her evening drive Marjorie called at the courts for her husband.

She generally found there the wives of the two married assistants. They were both friendly and ready to include her in the conversation. The subjects they discussed were bazaar prices, their husbands' prospects, dress, and the iniquities of the Indian tailors. They were at times full of the doings of those people whose circle was closed against them. It was gossip brought from the bazaar where the servants mingled on less exclusive terms than their masters and mistresses.

"Mrs. Rosario," said Marjorie, addressing one of them. "I wonder if you could help me with advice."

"Oh, yes, Mrs. Belton. Of course! I shall be only too happy to do so. Is it about your husband?" was the ready reply.

"No; it concerns my little daughter, Joan."

The child was helping the Indian boys of the tennis courts to field the balls, domineering over them and ordering them about with the readiness of the English-born child who acquires the art of ruling inferiors without instruction.

"She is very headstrong and escapes from the ayah, who grumbles and says she can't stay. In every other respect

Mariama is a good ayah, and I don't want to part with her. What am I to do?"

"Ah, my dear! These English-born children! they all get like that. She wants a European nursemaid who can make her listen to reason and obey."

"How am I to find one? Are there such people out here?"

"Perhaps not pukka English, but there are plenty of nice, country-born girls to be found who would be glad to come. Have you a room to give her?"

"Yes, next to the night nursery."

"Then you will have no difficulty."

"Will she have to take her meals with us?"

"She should have her food by herself."

"What will the servants say to the extra work?"

"They quite understand, and you will have no trouble."

"Can you give me the address of a servants' registry office?"

"Oh! My! We don't have such things out here! The ayah or the head boy will soon let it be known that you want a girl, and you will be suited."

On her arrival home that very evening she broached the subject to Raju and Mariama. They assured her that they could find someone who could run faster than Miss Joan and keep her in order. No objections were made. The proposal met with full approval, and Mariama said nothing more about giving up her situation.

(2)

Joan had been for her morning walk, heading a procession that began with herself and ended in a protesting ayah. In the cavalcade figured the kid and the duck, a pair difficult to manage since they refused to keep in line. The hen, tamed long ago by close association with bazaar imps, stepped along just ahead of the ayah. Her inclination was to sit down and brood. It was overcome by Mariama's ringed toe, which, firmly applied, lifted the resigned bird and sent her on the way.

Godfrey hurried over his breakfast which Raju had prepared to the minute—buttered toast, a couple of poached eggs, marmalade and fresh fruit. This was to last him till he came in at noon, when he would take his bath and a substantial meal called big breakfast by the servants. It would have

been more appropriately named if it had been termed lunch. In less than an hour he was in the brougham on his way back to work in the new building. He might have walked. The distance was not great, but he had already learnt the advisability of driving instead of walking through the heated air.

At the early breakfast Marjorie poured out his tea and shared the light fare provided by Raju. It was one of the few times in the twenty-four hours that she could have a quiet moment's conversation with her husband. Even then she could never be sure that she had his attention. His mind was filled with the business of which he had been put in charge. It was prospering, and he was becoming more and more absorbed in it each day that passed.

"Godfrey, I'm afraid Joan is getting out of hand with the ayah," she said, the morning after she had consulted with Mrs. Rosario.

"I suppose you will be obliged to have her more with you," he replied absently. He was wondering if the iron girders ordered some weeks ago would arrive to-day. The building of the residential wing was being held up for the need of them.

"I shouldn't mind that if the child was inclined to 'stay put.' I never knew such a restless little body. I am afraid I can't undertake to run after her every time she moves."

"What about the ayah? Can't she do the running?"

"Mariama is slow and not so young as she was. She is quite unable to cope with Joan's restlessness."

"I don't know what you are to do, I'm sure. Boy, is the brougham ready?"

"Yes, sir."

Godfrey rose from his seat and emptied his cup standing. Raju handed him his sun topee.

"I must be off."

He put his arm round his beloved wife and kissed her.

"Mrs. Rosario advises me to get a Eurasian girl as nurse."

"The very thing!" he replied with relief. "You can do that without my assistance. Find someone if you can who has some education. She will be able to teach Joan her A B C as well as romp with her."

Godfrey walked towards the portico where the brougham waited.

"I don't know if I can find one——"

Marjorie was always distrustful of herself and her capabilities.

"Make inquiries and we will talk it over. Good-bye, darling. I am in for a very busy morning. I shall probably have to drive to the goods station to hustle them up with some girders we have ordered."

He got into the brougham while he was speaking. Marjorie returned to the dining-room. Raju was waiting with his "house account" to discuss the meals for the day.

A squeal and Mariama's voice raised in strong protest made the troubled mother rise hastily and go to the nursery. Joan had finished her morning exercise and was preparing to take her bath. The child was stripped of her clothing and naked. She had the duck by its neck and was dragging it along the floor towards the bathroom.

"Mummie, I'm going to give my darling duckie a swim in my bath. It hasn't had a good wash for weeks and weeks, and it's getting quite grubby."

"Can't put duck in bath. That bird full of fleas," protested the ayah.

"I don't mind fleas. Besides, fleas can't swim. They will drown."

"Joan!" cried Marjorie. "Let go of the duck. You're strangling it. Let it go at once!"

Marjorie spoke with unusual severity. The duck was released. It found its voice and waddled back to the veranda, flapping its wings and quacking loudly.

"Now ayah give Miss Joan her bath, and when she has had it she must lie down on her cot." *A small bed.*

"I don't want to go to bed! I'm not a bit sleepy," cried Joan, beginning to whimper.

"You will have to go to bed this morning because you have been a very naughty girl." Mrs. Belton turned to the ayah. "When you have put Miss Joan in her cot come to me. I have something to say to you."

Joan had never seen her mother so stern. She was fairly frightened into acquiescence. Marjorie returned to the head boy and proceeded with the housekeeping. When it was finished she said.

"Raju, Miss Joan is getting too much for the ayah."

"Yes, ma'am. Missie giving plenty of trouble in the kitchen. While cook was at the bazaar Missie swept out the kitchen with the sweeper's broom. Cook finding broom in

his own curry pot. Very angry! He breaking curry pots and saying caste spoilt."

"The cook is not a caste man. He's a pariah."

"All the same, he talking of spoiling caste."

"Give him some new curry pots. How much do they cost?"

"One anna each," replied Raju, in a tone that might have been used if the pots had cost a pound a-piece.

"How many has Missie spoilt?"

"Four. One for meat, one for rice, one for vegetables and one for dhal."

"Four annas won't hurt me. We must get someone younger than Mariama who can run after Miss Joan and catch her before she gets into mischief."

"Yes, ma'am, that's best and proper."

"A Eurasian girl who has been to a mission school."

Raju looked thoughtful as he replied: "I think perhaps ayah knows of a girl."

"Please bring her as soon as possible. I shall have no peace of mind till she comes."

"In two days' time, ma'am."

(3)

For two days Marjorie kept a watchful eye on Joan. She was heartily sick of her self-imposed task. It had involved excursions into the back part of the premises at all hours of the day. However busy she might be with needlework or writing letters for the English mail, she found herself obliged to jump up and run down her troublesome little daughter.

The very day after Marjorie had spoken to Raju about securing a nurse girl for Joan she was disturbed just as she was going to lie down for the forty winks she was beginning to take after lunch in the heat of the afternoon. Ayah came in hastily with the announcement that Missie had run away. The ayah herself had dropped off into a doze after her midday meal, and Joan had seized the opportunity to escape.

"Can't catch that child!" gasped the panting woman.

"Too much plenty running."

"Where is she?"

"Helping syce to wash evening carriage."

Mrs. Belton slipped on her shoes again and followed the ayah out into the back premises. In the full glare of the early afternoon sun she saw Joan. She had possessed herself of the spoke-brush and with frequent dips into the bucket of dirty water was busy on a wheel of the Victoria. She was splashed from head to foot, and her clean white frock was as speckled as the hen.

In vain the syce pleaded with her for the brush. Every time he approached with outstretched hand to take it back he received a sharp rap over the knuckles.

As soon as Joan caught sight of her mother she knew that the game was up. She threw the brush at the man, hitting him full in the face, and bolted. Marjorie ran her to earth in the nursery bathroom, where she was already trying to divest herself of her soiled garments.

Marjorie lost no time over reproaches and scoldings. Armed with the hair-brush, she caught her rebellious little daughter by the arm. With the back of the hair-brush she administered the time-old punishment of the British nursery in India, and not before it was wanted. Joan received a good dose of "putt-putt" on the spot where it should go.

The wooden back of the brush stung, and Joan yelled. But she was conquered for the time. She was handed over to the ayah. Instead of pointing out the fact that she had only received what she deserved, Mariama, as soon as her mistress was out of sight, petted and consoled the weeping child as if she were the injured one. Joan's tears were dried in the belief that she had been treated very badly. Mariama actually promised to give Mummie hard putt-putt as soon as Mummie went to bed that night. Such are the ways with Hindu servants in dealing with their European charges. It was high time that a firmer moral rule was established in the nursery.

(4)

On the morning of the third day after Marjorie had asked Raju to find her a competent nurse to take charge of Joan, Mariama came into the dining-room where Godfrey and Marjorie were taking breakfast. She was pushing in front of her a shy, pretty Eurasian girl.

"This 'Oowellette,' " she announced. "She come to take care of missie."

"What name did you say?" asked Marjorie.

"'Woolette,'" explained Raju, who was waiting with his master's sun topee for the next move.

"I am Violet Roberts, please, lady," said the girl. "I come to ask Madam to take me as nurse to Miss Joan."

"This very good girl," remarked the ayah.

"You must wait till the master is gone. Then I will attend to you."

Godfrey had finished his breakfast and had received his topee from Raju. Marjorie, as was her custom, accompanied her husband to the brougham.

"This is an applicant for the nurse's situation," she said.

His eyes had dwelt upon the girl with curiosity. He had taken in the details of her appearance.

"Looks as if she might suit," he said.

"Rather young and inexperienced."

"Not too young for that mischievous little monkey Joan. She will be able to run after her and catch her, which is more than the ayah can do."

"What wages shall I offer?" asked Marjorie.

"Give her what she asks if you find on inquiry that she is what you want. I'm to have a rise in my salary this quarter, so I can afford it."

"Oh, Godfrey!" exclaimed his wife. "You had a rise only a month ago!"

"The Board is very pleased with what I have done with regard to the branch at Hyderabad. We are opening there as soon as I can get it going with temporary accommodation."

"Dearest, I am so glad!"

"Good-bye, little woman. Get that girl if she is satisfactory. I'm sure she will suit, nicely dressed, nicely behaved, and young enough to win Joan's obedience."

He drove off, and Marjorie with relief and hope in her heart for a more peaceful existence, turned back to make the better acquaintance of "Oowellette," otherwise Violet Roberts.

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CHAPTER FOUR

(I)

ALREADY Joan had taken command of the situation. She was standing by Violet's side when Marjorie got back, a little hand possessively clasping the girl's neat skirt.

"This is Violet, my new nurse," she announced as her mother appeared. "I like her. I'm going to show her my nursery and Billie and Duckie and Speck."

This last was the draggled hen filched from the cook's basket.

"Very well. She can go with you for ten minutes, not more. Then she must come back and tell me all about herself."

Violet glanced from the child to her future mistress.

"Ayah knows all about me, Madam, and can answer any questions you may like to ask. I will come back with missie in ten minutes."

Violet glanced at the cheap watch on her wrist and gave her hand to Joan. The girl's voice was soft and her speech grammatical, with little trace of the pidgin English spoken by the Indian servants. Her smile was attractive. Besides being youthful, she had a refined prettiness that betrayed good English blood. Her olive skin was smooth. She had black hair and large dark eyes.

Her costume surprised the English woman. It fitted and was fashionable, although it was "veranda made" by a native tailor. The material was of coloured cotton, pale heliotrope of the material known as "nurse's cloth." The dress was finished off with white collar and cuffs.

Marjorie approved of the girl's general appearance and was pleased to recognize the fact that she seemed far more British than Indian, in spite of her dark blood. The mixture of race showed in the warm light-brown complexion and the ease with which she wore her English clothes.

"Violet Roberts did you say was her name?" she inquired of Mariama. The ayah was showing strange signs of con-

fusion. She shifted from one foot to the other with a jingle of toe-rings, and nervously fingered the folds of the fine muslin that draped her ample form.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Where was the girl educated?"

"At the Catholic school, Madras."

"What experience has she had?"

"Violet has been nurse in an officer's family at St. Thomas's Mount."

"Why did she leave?"

The ayah hesitated, and Mrs. Belton's suspicions were aroused.

"Was there anything wrong? Did her mistress send her away for any fault?"

"No, ma'am, that girl never doing anything naughty. She very good girl. Mrs. Davis very fond of Violet."

"Then why did she leave Mrs. Davis?"

"I send telegram to come directly missus ask for nurse. I said—I said—" again there was the halting speech.

"You had known Violet, then?"

"When she was a small, small child—and since."

"And you thought that she would suit me?"

"Yes, ma'am. Please forgive poor old ayah!"

"I have nothing to forgive if I have got a suitable servant in Violet. But I don't understand why you should call her from a good situation to take one that she may not like as well."

"Violet liking all right," replied Mariama confidently. There was a short silence. Mrs. Belton felt that she had been slightly compromised by the woman's action. Violet had not asked for leave apparently. She had come away from her situation without retaining any claim upon it. Marjorie could imagine an uncomfortable scene between the girl and her late mistress. It seemed to be a bad case of breaking faith for which there was no excuse but caprice.

"Did Mrs. Davis pay Violet's wages up to date?"

"No, ma'am, she too angry. Won't give any money."

"Then how did Violet find enough to pay for her railway ticket?"

"I send postal-order."

"You! Why should you do that?"

The ayah did not reply. Again there was a pause. It was perplexing. There was something mysterious about it which

she could not fathom. She began to suspect that Mariama was hiding something.

"Well? Can you tell me why you sent the money for Violet's fare?"

She determined to get to the bottom of the mystery. If she could not persuade the ayah to speak out, perhaps the girl would be more communicative and ready to explain her presence.

"I think you had better call in Violet. She is in the nursery. Tell her to come to me."

"No need to call Violet," said the ayah. "I tell true word only. I tell missus everything."

"Then perhaps you will say why you sent for her, why you upset Mrs. Davis, who is probably a good mistress, and caused one of her servants to leave so inconveniently. What did you say in your telegram?"

"I tell one lie. Missus please excuse. I say I very ill, thinking I'm going to die. Violet must come at once if she wanted to see me alive."

"And why should Violet want to see you? What on earth is the meaning of such extraordinary behaviour? What is Violet to you? What are you to the girl?"

"Missus kindly excuse poor old ayah! Not my fault. Violet is my daughter."

(2)

Mrs. Belton stared at the woman in amazement. Mariama must be crazy to claim that pretty English-looking girl as a daughter.

"Your adopted daughter, you mean."

"No, ma'am, she is my own, my very own child."

"Who's her father?" asked Marjorie, too startled to think of the personal nature of her question. The ayah, now that the secret was out, had no scruples in telling the blunt truth.

"That child's father was Major Roberts. I was ayah to Mrs. Roberts. Then she went to England with the three children. Major Roberts say I must stay on till he, too, go to England. I stay. Two months after he left, my Violet was born."

"Where did you go after he went away?"

"He tell me to go to the Mission. He write to the Mother Superior and send money asking nuns to look after the child."

So when I was well again they take the baby and send me to another place with a lady as ayah."

"Does he give you any money now?"

"No, ma'am. Never hearing anything about him these days. He go back to his wife and children same like other gentlemen——"

Marjorie was once more plunged into deep thought. To her inexperienced ears, it was an extraordinary story. The ayah's own attitude towards the incident was a revelation. No trace of shame or regret over her lapse of virtue was visible. On the contrary she was, if anything, proud of her exploit.

"What did the Mother Superior, under whose care you were left, say to your having the child?"

"She say I very bad girl. Must fine candle and walk to St. Thomas's tomb without shoes."

"Did you do it?"

"I buy big candle and I walk all the way. Plenty tired and feet sore. But mustn't grumble. It make me come Christian again."

"Where was your husband?"

"He died when I was young girl before I go to Mrs. Roberts. I was only one poor widow when Mrs. Roberts left. No matter what poor widows do. Must live. Nobody saying anything to widows."

"Yet the Mother Superior called you a bad girl!"

"Priest's way of thinking only. Hindus tell different. Major Roberts good, kind gentleman, plenty sorry when wife went to England."

The ayah stood regarding Mrs. Belton with an ingratiating smile while Marjorie considered the circumstances. She must report the facts to Godfrey and take his advice.

"What wages does Violet want?"

"What missus please."

She inquired what were the wages Mrs. Davis had been giving.

The ayah named the sum with an explanation.

"Violet must have enough to buy proper English-pattern clothes. The dirzee can make."

"Very well. I'll talk it over with the master. Anyway, let her unpack her box and settle down in the room that you have prepared for the nurse."

(3)

Belton returned to the bungalow at sunset. He was worried and tired out. The girders had not arrived. He had spent a couple of hours telegraphing down the line, only to discover that they had been side-tracked and forgotten by the Indian clerk in the heavy transport department.

A young, newly-imported retail salesman established in the recently opened Hyderabad Branch had allowed goods to go out to an Indian purchaser without payment. The terms were to be strictly cash, a necessary precaution in India in connection with retail transactions. It would be months before the money would be paid in, if it was ever recovered at all.

The man in charge of one of the departments in the Bellary Branch had suddenly been taken ill and was incapacitated for work. He had been carried off to the Civil Hospital threatened with an operation for appendicitis. Godfrey had no one to put in his place, and had been trying to do the work himself with the help of the head clerk, who was an Indian.

He brought with him a bundle of letters which must be answered after dinner, since he had been unable to attend to his correspondence in office hours. This meant hurrying over dinner and sitting up till nearly midnight.

He had no time for domestic affairs. His wife must take the responsibility of these on her own shoulders. He had not forgotten the new nursemaid. However much occupied he might be, he could still admire a pretty face when it was brought to his notice.

"Well, darling! Did you find the girl satisfactory?"

"Quite satisfactory as a nurse."

"You engaged her, of course?"

Marjorie smiled grimly as she replied enigmatically:

"She engaged me as mistress."

He glanced up from his soup with raised eyebrows.

"It's a most extraordinary case," his wife continued. "I could scarcely believe my ears when I heard the tale. The girl is Mariama's daughter by a Major Roberts in whose service she lived."

Marjorie told the story, which did not seem to shock Godfrey as it had shocked her. He laughed as he applied himself to the fish course.

"No wonder she has her share of good looks. You engaged her, of course?"

"I said I would consult you. It gave me time to make up my mind."

"I don't think you need hesitate about taking her on, unless you find someone you like better."

"No one else has applied."

"Does Joan cotton to her?"

"Joan fell in love with her at once and seems inclined to be guided and ruled. Joan wanted to bring her pets into the nursery, but Violet said very decidedly that she was not accustomed to live with goats and farmyard birds. If she was expected to do so here, she would go back to Mrs. Davis, where the children behaved like proper English children, and not like common bazaar imps. This was enough for Joan, who was greatly impressed. She was overruled as she has never been by the ayah, and the menagerie was left outside in the veranda."

"Keep the woman by all means and let us be thankful that our little maid has someone at last capable of controlling her. Boy! Bring the coffee to the study. I have some writing to do. And tell the bungalow peon that he must wait for the letters. They must be taken to the post to-night in time for the night mail."

Marjorie, as was her custom after dinner, retired to the drawing-room, where she had left her half-finished novel. The Europe Stores had a book department. Godfrey, ever mindful of his wife's happiness and comfort, kept her well supplied with whatever literature he thought she would be interested in.

She scarcely knew herself as Marjorie White, the daughter of the despised innkeeper of the "Spotted Cow," the girl who had been wooed and won in the tea-house at Yarmouth. She had a good though not large staff of servants, a horse and carriage of her own, no shopping to do, no hunting on foot with a heavy basket for places where household necessities could be obtained at a less price than in the big shops patronized by the more wealthy residents of the seaport town.

As for dress, Marjorie had always been clever with her needle. Now she had the benefit of the Indian tailor. All that he needed was directions and a good supply of paper patterns. She marvelled at the dexterity with which the man followed her instructions.

But a large wardrobe was not necessary in the small circle of her acquaintances. She might have increased the number of her friends if the women with whom she came into contact had interested her more.

In her drives she passed the English club, the lawn-tennis ground, the golf-course, but knew none of the players. Her husband, with his position in retail trade, was not eligible for the club.

Remembering her origin and position in England, this did not trouble her. She would not have been at her ease with the Government officials, civil or military. She was quite content with the visits of the wives of the clerks and assistants employed at the Stores. They showed her a gratifying respect, recognizing the fact that she was pukka English, while they were country-born.

Life ran smoothly and happily from the time Violet entered Mrs. Belton's service. Joan became less wild and more amenable to discipline and reason. The lessons begun with Violet proved also a success. The girl had a gift for teaching and exercised a refining influence on her high-spirited charge.

Billy and the rest of her ill-chosen pets were relegated to their proper places. Instead, a large cage appeared containing some long-tailed green parrots. Violet showed Joan how to feed them with the fruit they liked. She also taught her how to attract the grey squirrels that lived in the thatched roof of the bungalow. She learnt to watch the yellow lizards on the wall as they caught the mosquitoes and house-flies. Once Joan captured a gecko by the tail, with the intention of putting it into a cardboard box and making a pet of it. The lizard's tail came off in her hand and she screamed in dismay.

Violet explained that the little reptile would not live in captivity. It must be set at liberty to feed itself. Another distraction was a fascinating piece of wool-work on canvas with a gorgeous assortment of brilliant colours.

Mariama was supremely content and the household dropped into peace and quiet.

CHAPTER FIVE

CHRISTMAS was over. The two first months of the year were fleeting fast and the weather was getting perceptibly warmer.

"Darling, I must arrange for you to go to the hills," said Godfrey, one morning at early breakfast, the best moment for discussing private matters.

He lunched now at the Stores. By this time the place was nearing completion. The firm was doing far better business than the most hopeful members of the Board had anticipated. The restaurant was running and the residential wing was partly occupied.

Godfrey's salary had been again increased by a bonus on the receipts. He was quite able to send his wife and daughter out of the intense heat of April and May. In June rain would fall and the climate at Bellary would be more bearable. If Marjorie wished, she could take a third month and stay over June.

"Where do you propose to send us?" asked Marjorie, who was not in love with the prospect of a separation from her husband. "I must have the ayah as well as Violet with me."

"I have heard of a good boarding-house on the Shevaroy Hills and I am thinking of securing rooms at once. A man who has been in the firm is leaving. He and his wife are opening what they call a private hotel at Yercaud. It is virtually a boarding-house, and I think they will make you very comfortable."

"Oh, Godfrey! Must I go?" cried Marjorie, as her heart misgave her.

"It will be good for you and even better for Joan, who is beginning to look very white. You don't seem any too well, either," he continued, fixing his eyes upon her with a searching gaze.

"There's a reason for it, dear, if I am a bit run down."

He understood at once.

"A little son on the way? Good news. It will be the first grandson for the old man."

They talked of old times and the likelihood of a softening on the part of Benjamin Belton. Godfrey had maintained a

regular correspondence with his sister, who had felt his leaving England more than a little. He wrote every Sunday and told her the details of his work and of the welfare of himself and family. However busy he might be, he allowed nothing to interfere with his weekly letter home.

Olive on her side kept him fully informed of all that was going on. She spoke of her mother's failing health and latterly of the old lady's rather sudden death from neglected pneumonia and influenza.

Dick and Clem remained unmarried. They were absorbed in running the farm, experimenting with the growth of sugar-beet and the breeding of pigs.

Olive's boarding-house had turned out a great success. She had secured eight or nine permanent residents, "pigs that paid the rent," she called them privately. She needed no longer to rely upon the casual summer visitors. A man had been found to take up the house-agency business. He was a progressive. Under his advice, new bungalows were built upon the cliff and half a dozen house-boats launched upon the Broads, upon which the Belton property merged.

Harry Oakley was a man of about forty. He took rooms in Olive's house and became one of her permanent boarders. He had been educated as a lawyer, but in this case found house-agency more to his taste.

Godfrey and Marjorie were not surprised to hear later that Oakley and Olive had married.

Old Ben had aged. The rheumatism that had troubled him before Godfrey left England increased with each winter that passed, and crippled him. He had been more and more obliged to leave his two sons to carry on without him.

Olive asked if Godfrey could not manage to run home and see them all. She would be glad to put them up. Her house had been enlarged to double its size. Surely it was time for Joan to come home for her education. His sister assured him that the trouble over his marriage would be healed by this time and that her father would be only too glad to greet them.

"It would be very nice to see dear old Norfolk again," said Marjorie wistfully.

"I should be glad to make it up with the old man, but there is no hurry," replied Godfrey. "He is good for many years to come."

"All the same, it would be as well not to put it off too long," said Marjorie.

"I haven't completed my three years yet and I signed on for five. Besides, there's another consideration. I shouldn't like to leave my job. Things are going splendidly in the development of the business. I am conceited enough to think that no other man could pick up the threads of my work and carry it on to the end as I hope to do."

"You have been very clever at it, darling," said his faithful partner.

"It has been an undertaking after my own heart. The Board has treated me very generously in the matter of giving me a free hand, which is half the battle when one is opening out with what is virtually pioneering work. I haven't been kept down to a cut-and-dried scheme of another man's devising. Well, now, about Yercaud. I shall write to Mrs. Williams and tell her to expect you the first week in March. I shall ask for two rooms, one for you and one for Joan and Violet, and a go-down-room for the ayah."

"And you will come for part of the time?"

"If I can get away."

"You must insist on having some sort of a holiday. Even if it is only for three weeks, it will be better than nothing. You ought to have six weeks' holiday if you consider your health," pleaded the anxious wife.

But she had little hope of turning her indefatigable husband from his design.

"I shouldn't care to take the time off if the work was not finished."

"If you can't and won't take a holiday this year, you must go home next. I'll go ahead of you for six months and you must make it three for yourself at least if you can't manage more. We'll come out together."

Troubled by the wan expression of her face he promised, with the disturbing "if" behind it, that she should go back to her beloved Yarmouth and he would join her when his time was up. If the work that he was doing was sufficiently forward to be left to others—if his health really needed the change—if—and if— His promises were not very heartening. It made her feel sick as he let her see how his ambition held him in its grip. He was wrapped up in his schemes. The Bellary Branch of the Stores was going ahead with marvellous rapidity and success. He hoped soon to hand it over to his successor.

But this would not release him from what he considered his

obligations to his employers. The Hyderabad venture, still in its initial stage, was equally attractive to a man of Belton's temperament. It promised a new and wide field of retail trade. He was becoming even more interested in it than he had been in the Bellary scheme. He had found the latter begun and going forward to its completion, whereas he would have the guiding of the Hyderabad enterprise entirely in his own hands from the very beginning. So far the only matter accomplished was the purchase of the site and the negotiation with the city fathers of Hyderabad. He determined that it should not be his fault if it was not a greater and better paying concern than the Branch at Bellary.

CHAPTER SIX

(I)

THE visit to the hills benefited the wife and child immensely. Violet, too, looked the better for it. She and her charge were full of lamentation at having to leave the mild open air of the hills. The orange trees grew luxuriantly in the garden. They were so plentiful that Joan found herself at liberty to climb a tree whenever she was so inclined and pick a dish of ripening fruit for the table. It was not too cold to paddle in the mountain streams, and she could be out all day provided she wore her pith topee.

The only person who was pleased to return to the plains was Mariama. She did not like the cold nights of the hills and complained that they gave her fever.

Godfrey persuaded his wife to stay on till the end of June. He was not able to join them. Marjorie regarded him with anxious eyes. He seemed none the worse for the hot weather, a trifle browner, perhaps, with a few more lines upon his face. He was delighted to have his wife back, although Raju had taken every care of him.

The morning after their return, Joan ran into the room where her parents were breakfasting. Violet, ever watchful like the good maid that she was, appeared behind her. In her arms Joan carried a little black-and-white puppy. It was half-grown, and had been given to the child by a planter who was staying at the same hotel.

"That's right," said Godfrey with approval. "Better than the kid, isn't it? I hope it will be friends with the parrots."

"It isn't going to live in the parrots' cage. Fluffie, that's its name, is going to sleep in a basket under my cot, and Violet will put her to bed when I go."

Joan marched off to take her morning walk, her pet following under the shepherding of the nurse.

"Dearest, I am going to spring a surprise upon you," said Godfrey, as he opened a second boiled egg. "I hope you won't mind. It is all in the day's work. I shall have to leave Bellary and go to Hyderabad to live."

Marjorie looked at him with a shade of dismay in her eyes.

"I shall be sorry to give up my nice little home here. Have you got a house at Hyderabad?"

"I've secured a good bungalow just outside the town, standing in ground that the firm are acquiring, that is to say, renting on long lease. It is close to the buildings we are putting up. The Branch Store will be much on the same pattern as this we have built here."

"When do you want to move?" asked Marjorie, thinking of her own future.

"As soon as possible," he replied cheerfully, as if the undertaking was no more formidable than sending off a consignment of goods to a purchaser. "It won't take long to move, a day or two at the most. I shall be very glad to find myself on the spot when I wake in the morning instead of having to face the railway journey there and back. As soon as I am out of sight, it seems to me as though the work comes suddenly to a standstill."

"Is the scheme looked upon with favour?" asked Marjorie.

"The city fathers are delighted with the prospect of having a first-class shop within reach. They are being as helpful as possible. But, of course, they have nothing to do with the workpeople and can't assist me to hustle them on."

"Is the Nizam in favour of the Stores?"

"His chief buyers are, the men who have the privilege of purchasing supplies for the palace, the stables and the household troops. If we get their custom alone we shall do very well. But where the palace buyers go, the majority of the noblemen follow. And the town is stuffed full of rich men, Moslems mostly."

"What are these Moslems like?"

"I have found them first-rate fellows to deal with, shrewd, of course, but courteous and astonishingly well educated. There is one man whom you will meet, Adam-u-din Sahib. He is disposed to be very friendly and he is a gentleman to the tips of his fingers."

"Has he got a nice wife? I suppose she will see me and I shall have to know her."

"I know nothing about his domestic affairs. If he has a wife, she is gosha and lives in the harem. Unless he asks you to pay her a visit, you won't come into contact with her."

Marjorie did not like the prospect of the move. She was

not in a condition just now to settle into new and unfamiliar quarters.

"Couldn't you continue going to the new Branch by train every other day as you are doing now?"

"I might have managed it, although it would have been very inconvenient. The fact is this bungalow that we now occupy here in Bellary will be overrun by workpeople for the next three months. An addition is to be made so that any visiting director can be put up. The annexe to the bungalow will be arranged so that he can bring his own servants and 'do' for himself without looking to the Manager for hospitality."

"But there are the residential quarters. Why shouldn't he go there?"

"It is filled to overflowing with the staff. In this climate we must have space. We may have to enlarge the quarters to accommodate the staff wanted here. This bungalow is to be the permanent residence of the Bellary Branch Manager, with rooms suitable for a boss official if they are required."

"What sort of a place is Hyderabad?" asked Marjorie, doing her best to reconcile herself to the decree her husband had imposed on her.

"It is a most interesting old city. It is not in British territory, so it may be rather like living in a foreign town. But I don't think you will notice that things are very different from living here or in any other large town in British India. I must be off. Good-bye, darling. I am so glad to have you back again."

"Were you dull without me?"

The farewell kiss had to be repeated.

"Of course I was, but I was too busy to feel lonely. Between ourselves, I am proud of what I have done. The directors recognize my work and have expressed their great satisfaction."

He went off in his brougham elated and contented, leaving his wife with a secret uneasiness in her mind at the thought of having to break up the comfortable home that she had created round herself.

(2)

The move was effected in July, when the heat had somewhat abated and the south-west monsoon had cooled the air. It was astonishing with what ease things were done when

there was a good staff of servants to take the work in hand.

Indian bungalows are mostly built on the same pattern, and Marjorie discovered that her new house was a replica of the one she had left. Sometimes it was difficult to believe that she was not still in Bellary. Even the surroundings outside were somewhat similar. There was the big emporium growing before her eyes. The number of workmen on it was doubled after Godfrey came, and the building went on apace. He was not allowing the grass to grow under his feet.

The city magnates had taken kindly to the scheme. They fully appreciated having a big shop run on European lines in their midst. Quick sales at moderate fixed prices were a novelty and attraction to men who were accustomed to find old stuff that they had often fingered and refused to buy. They were also shrewd enough to know that business on these latest up-to-date lines was likely to succeed. Some of them had already taken shares in the firm. This action was attributed to Belton's good advertising and pushing of the business.

Adam-u-din Sahib was one of the first to make the venture. He was known to Belton as the Palace Agent. He and his father before him had held the lucrative position, and the present Agent had the reputation of being a millionaire. In addition to being wealthy, he was held in high esteem by his fellow citizens.

In appearance he was tall and handsome and of about fifty years of age. He had a strong Arab type of figure and the good features that mark the Muhammadan of high birth.

He was well educated and held advanced views on many modern subjects. But he had never been to England, to his great regret. His father had been anxious that he should remain on the spot and retain his hold on the supply agency. There were plenty of men who would be glad to secure the billet for themselves and their sons. It was too valuable an appointment to run any risk of losing by absence.

The Palace Agent lived in a mansion in the city. He maintained a large establishment of retainers and servants. Many of the former were relatives, some of them distantly connected by marriage only.

Adam-u-din Sahib recognized the straightforward, disinterested qualities of the Englishman and was attracted to him.

Belton found him of great use in trading with the Muhammadans of the town who were on the municipal council. Whenever he was in any difficulty or his words were doubted, he sought the counsel and help of the Palace Agent and was never disappointed. If Godfrey was in the wrong, he put him right. If his intentions were likely to benefit the people, the Sahib supported and backed him heartily. It was done with that strain of old-fashioned courtesy inherent in the well-bred Oriental.

In the absence of Europeans of his own class, Belton turned instinctively to the Indian gentleman even when there was no special subject to draw them together. Adam-u-din was not long in recognizing the friendliness of the young English merchant. He met with the same good manners that were natural to himself. This inspired confidence and fostered the intimacy that was springing up between the two men. It ripened into a strong personal friendship that was valued on both sides. When an Indian forms a tie of the kind—it is not made hastily—it is of a strong nature and deeply rooted. Only death can break it.

Belton saw nothing of the Palace Agent's family. He was not aware that there was a wife, although Adam-u-din had spoken of his sons who were living with him. To two of these Belton was introduced one day. He was told that they were in business in Hyderabad, and that they would probably step into their father's shoes. Adam-u-din brought them to call at the bungalow, having first as was usual asked permission to do so. They came on a Sunday and were introduced to Marjorie. They were both married, but it was not etiquette to mention wives and children, except under the general term "family."

A third son, Hassan, a boy of seven, had recently been sent to England for his education. His father hoped that the training which he would receive at an English public school and university would fit him for an appointment in the Hyderabad Government Service, or possibly he might join the Nizam's personal staff. He recognized the fact that something more was required for such an appointment than mere wealth and interest.

The Sahib had mentioned what he was doing with regard to Hassan, and he had Godfrey's full approval.

(3)

It was on the morning of a day towards the end of November when the doctor and nurse were called by telegram from Bellary to help Marjorie through her troubles.

Godfrey came home early to his lunch. The medical man met him in the veranda.

"Well, what news?" cried the anxious husband.

"Your wife is doing as well as we could hope."

"And the son?"

"It's twin daughters," the doctor replied, with a twisted smile. "Two beautiful little girls."

"Are they all right?"

"As healthy as little monkeys."

"Come and have lunch. We'll bust a bottle of fizz over the occasion," said Godfrey.

They sat down to the excellent food provided by Raju and talked of current affairs over the champagne. They could neither of them spare time to linger. The doctor was anxious to get to his civil hospital. Godfrey was due at the Stores at half-past three.

The nurse, an experienced midwife from Bellary, had her hands full with the two babies. Mariama, excellent with one infant, had never known what it was to have two under her charge. She was flustered and bewildered.

"Missus can't feed two babies!" she kept saying.

The nurse turned on her sharply.

"Of course she can't. She isn't fit to feed one, let alone two!"

"Aiyoh! What can do!"

The nurse did not trouble to answer her. She went to the back veranda and called Raju.

"Butler! We want two amahs (wet-nurses). Go and find them at once and bring them into the nursery."

The Indian servant is rarely at a loss where his own race is concerned. By five o'clock two healthy, frightened young women were brought in. They were washed and dressed in clean white *saris* under Mariama's supervision. Each was handed a little scrap of hungry humanity and the infantile cries ceased.

The nurse's attention had been diverted from the invalid, who had been made comfortable and was supposed to be

asleep. Godfrey, before leaving for the Stores, had been allowed to see his wife for a few minutes. He had bent over her with a heart full of love. He knew that she would be as disappointed as himself that the longed-for boy was not vouchsafed. He did not mention his regrets.

"Well done, darling! I would rather run a dozen Branches of our Stores than go through what you have so bravely faced."

Marjorie's eyes dwelt upon him as though she saw him afar off. Her lips moved faintly under his and she smiled. The nurse glanced at her sharply. She touched his arm.

"She can't bear any more, sir. You had better go. You shall see her again this evening, when we will hope that she will have recovered her strength."

"She's all right, isn't she?" he asked, with a sudden spasm of anxiety.

The nurse did not answer the question directly. But as she read the anxious expression in his eyes, she tried to reassure him.

"The doctor is coming again at six. We shall do all we can, you may be sure. What she wants is a good night's rest. By to-morrow morning she will have picked up a bit. She had a very hard time, poor thing, and I am afraid that she is desperately disappointed that the twins are both girls. She told me that she was so longing for a son."

"Better luck next time," he replied. They were walking towards the front veranda where the brougham waited. "Please tell her that I am very glad that we have two little playmates for Joan."

At six o'clock that evening Godfrey was summoned home. He threw down his pen and rushed to the entrance of the building calling for his carriage. He hurried to his wife's room. Doctor and nurse were in attendance. They drew aside and made room for him. Marjorie recognized him and smiled. But she was sinking fast. His hand closed over hers. Presently she gave a deep sigh and breathed his name with an effort.

Ten minutes later she was dead.

CHAPTER SEVEN

(I)

IN the afternoon of the following day Marjorie was buried. Her husband returned to his desolate house from the funeral and was met by an excited Joan. Questions impossible to answer poured from her lips. Violet stood behind the child. She was silent.

"Has Mummie gone back to Yercaud?" asked Joan. As he did not reply, she answered the question herself. "Yes, I think she must have gone to the hills and Violet is crying because she has been left behind."

Violet's red eyes and sodden handkerchief confirmed the accusation of weeping. As the girl's eyes rested on her master he read in them the warm sympathy that could not fail to bring a little balm to the sorely wounded spirit.

"Yes, little one, yes," he managed to say to Joan. He took her hand and she led him to the nursery.

"Take Violet's chair, Daddy, and I'll sit on your knee." She turned to Violet. "You go and fetch our new babies. I'm going to divide them with Daddy."

Without waiting for a summons, Mariama was already entering with the little ones in procession with their amahs. The women were young and shy. Pride in their position, in their new clothes and the knowledge of the food that was in preparation for their evening meal, filled them with gratification. They had no more thought or regret for their own offspring than the cow has for its calf. For the next nine or ten months their future was assured. There would be a handsome present when Mariama dismissed them to their mud huts and their families. The one and only drawback was the rigid dieting that would be enforced. The tamarind and betel-nut, the ganja and tobacco for chewing would be forbidden.

"Show the new babies," commanded Joan. "Now, Daddy, which one will you choose for your very own?"

"Oh, this one!" he said, glancing reluctantly at the innocent little beings that had cost him his wife's life.

"All right. Violet, you understand the bald one is Daddy's. The other is mine."

"You must be very good to it," said her father.

"Of course I shall be good to it, and so will Violet, won't you? And we'll be good to your baby, too, Daddy, if it behaves itself. And if mine grows up before yours, I shall not change with you."

The chatter of his little daughter beguiled his thoughts from his own acute grief. Violet dried her eyes once more and entered into Joan's world, with the gentle smile that was part of her charm.

"I am going to love both the babies," she said diplomatically.

"And now about names," said Joan, who did not intend to let her father escape until this business about her little sisters was concluded to her satisfaction. "I shall call mine Lovie. Mummie called me that sometimes."

"Then I will call mine Dovie," responded Belton.

"Your baby has got no hair on its head. Ayah says it ought to be a boy. Then it wouldn't matter about the hair."

"Its hair will come in time when it is older," said her father.

"Anyway, you had better bring yours up as a boy if you can't send it back to the Stores and have it changed. We haven't any boys in the family yet. Perhaps Violet may have one, but I don't think it is likely, as she is not married. And, besides, she isn't old enough, are you, Violet?"

Godfrey rose to go. He had plenty to occupy his time: his wife's personal property to look through and put away, letters to write, payments to make and Raju to interview.

If his sister Olive had not married, he would assuredly have asked her to come out to India and join him. But now that she had a husband, he knew that she could not leave home. He must carry on as best he could. He had no fear that the household would lapse into confusion or discomfort. If he could run a large shop with all its ramifications, he could rule a small household such as Marjorie had established. With Mariama and Violet in the nursery and Raju to carry on the housekeeping, matters should remain very much the same as they were at present.

He made a few alterations in the routine of the house. He could not face the lonely meals. He ordered Violet to bring Joan in to breakfast and take her own meals at the same

time. Joan sat in her mother's empty seat. Violet's chair was placed between them. The child was delighted. It included seeing her father drive away to office while she stood on the top steps of the veranda waving her farewells. Immediately afterwards she and Violet with the two babies went for their morning walk in the shade of the trees that bordered the compound. The same arrangement about the dinner was made. It was fixed for half-past seven instead of eight, on account of Joan's bedtime. As soon as the meal was finished, Violet took her charge to the nursery. They said good night and Godfrey saw no more of them till the next morning, unless he was called in to comfort his little daughter.

Joan could get on happily enough during the day when Violet saw to it that she was occupied with her lessons or her toys. But after the nurse had gone to her room, Joan missed her mother's good night. The tears came and she refused to be comforted unless her father was fetched. It was always painful to have to answer all the questions the child put to him concerning her mother's prolonged absence. Fortunately, these storms of grief gradually died away and Violet was able to do the consoling.

After a time Belton, who was always disposed to be sociable, began to talk to Violet at the breakfast- and dinner-table. He drew her into the conversation which he carried on with his talkative little daughter.

He was surprised to find that the girl had been fairly well educated by the good nuns by whom she had been brought up. She possessed intelligence enough to listen when he got away from the childish subjects that interested Joan, and spoke of his beloved Stores.

His wife's death had caused but a very short break in his regular work. On the day after the funeral he had returned to his usual seat in the office and had dealt with the accumulation of letters that were awaiting his attention on the office table.

The members of the staff had been sympathetic as far as was possible with the reserved Englishman. They had expected a nervous breakdown, but they detected no sign of it.

Marjorie had formed only a small circle of friends and acquaintances either at Hyderabad or Bellary, and with none of these had she ever been intimate. Those wives of the members of the staff whom she had known were country-born, a class to which the Englishwoman was not drawn.

The good souls were quite ready to rally round the bereaved man and do their best for him. But Godfrey let them see that he needed no help. Also he gave them to understand that he was capable of managing his domestic affairs without any assistance from outside.

He kept his wife's carriage for the use of the children. Joan and the babies, ayah and amahs packed into the Victoria under Violet's supervision and took their usual evening drive. A place had to be found for Fluffie the dog, whose nose was not to be put out of joint by the new arrivals.

Then came the business of baptizing the infants. Godfrey had discussed the question of possible names with Marjorie more than once.

"The boy's name is to be Benjamin after his grandfather," she had said decisively. "Neither of your brothers has married yet. This child will be the first boy of his generation. The old family name should be continued."

"My grandfather and his father before him were Benjamins," Godfrey had said with approval.

"Why didn't your father carry it on? Richard should have been a Benjamin."

"My father, as you and I know, was of a jealous nature. He declared that as long as he was alive there should be only one Benjamin in the family. He would leave it to his sons to perpetuate the name."

"So it is up to us to continue it!" Marjorie had cried. "Curious that it should fall to you and the publican's daughter——"

"Don't, darling! I hate to hear you talk like that! If he had only known you, he would have fallen in love with you himself."

Marjorie had laughed as she replied:

"Dearest, it was the son and not the old father that I wanted. My poor old dad wasn't so bad as they made out. Living among all those rough fishing folk who came to the 'Spotted Cow,' it was not to be wondered at that he became coarse like them. Then Benjamin it shall be."

"But, Marjorie, supposing it is a girl?"

"Oh, no! Joan with her high spirits is quite enough in that line. She will be a handful for Aunt Olive to manage when we leave her behind in old Norfolk."

"All the same, we may as well be prepared for the worst. How about Elizabeth? My mother's name was Elizabeth."

But Marjorie vetoed Elizabeth.

"Jane?" She had shaken her head. "Mary?"

"Too common for words!"

"You suggest something."

"Phillis."

"Not bad. We might call her Phil, a boy's name."

"Or Faith or Edna, or Josephine?"

"Which we could turn into Joe, another boy's name," Godfrey had said. "I like Faith better. Anyway, we must wait for the event, dearest."

"It will be very good for Joan to have a little brother," said the mother.

"And now," thought Godfrey bitterly, "she has gone and left me to choose their names!"

(2)

The twins were baptized Phillis and Faith. The christening took place at the nearest military station where there was a church. The occasion was marked by the gift of a new *sari* to Mariama and of a ready-made Europe frock from the Stores for Violet. On Raju was bestowed a wrist-watch of gun-metal. He had provided an iced cake, to Joan's great delight.

Joan had been allowed to choose which child was to bear the name of Phillis and which Faith. She decided that the dark-haired one she called Lovie was to be Phillis. Her Daddy's baby, Dovie, who was still almost bald, was baptized Faith, a name mentioned by Marjorie when Godfrey had suggested others. The new names were nothing to Joan. She preferred Lovie and Dovie.

Time passed monotonously and quickly. Life ran smoothly in Godfrey's house. Before Marjorie's death he had applied to be sent back to his old billet at Bellary. His wife had wished to return as soon as possible after her confinement. The enlargement of the Bellary bungalow was finished and many little improvements had been made.

Under the present altered circumstances Belton had no desire to go back to the place where he would feel his loss more acutely than in Hyderabad. Moreover, the Branch at Bellary had been established on a firm foundation and required nothing more in the way of development. All that

was needed there was to carry on what had been well begun. Whereas in Hyderabad the enterprise was by no means so effectually secured.

The Europe Stores having shown the way, imitators sprang up and introduced a competition that was annoying, although it was not in the least likely to succeed. The Indians who attempted it may have had the money, but they shrank from risking it. They also lacked the progressive enterprise, and were profoundly ignorant of the methods of the retail dealer to get his goods on the market.

When these tradesmen failed, there was a jealous antagonism that prompted a malicious undermining of credit. Various reports that were not true were circulated. The Stores were said not to be European, but to depend upon Japan rather than upon Europe for their goods. They were reported to be on the verge of bankruptcy. Their prices were exorbitant compared with those of Bombay and Calcutta; they paid their staff next to nothing and dismissed them at a moment's notice when business was slack.

Godfrey, confident in his management and in the soundness of the enterprise, carried on with increased energy; and he was successful. It was at this juncture that he found support and encouragement from the Palace Agent. The Sahib pointed out the futility of the local competition without the means of advertising and display. To show his belief in the firm, he increased his custom and gave large orders right and left for goods that hitherto had come from Bombay.

The Board was aware of the trouble that had arisen. When Godfrey notified his decision to remain on at Hyderabad, they expressed the warmest satisfaction and breathed a sigh of relief. The secretary intimated the readiness of the Board to back Belton up in any proposed developments that he thought would be to their advantage. Was there anything, they asked, that he would like done to the bungalow in which he was living to make it more comfortable? He replied that beyond petty repairs in keeping the roof watertight nothing was needed.

(3)

It was just six months after Marjorie's death when Godfrey summoned Mariama to his study. She obeyed the call and stood before him, doing her best to preserve the stolid

expression assumed by the Indian when he is to listen to the commands of the dominant Western man.

"Mariama, I intend to ask your daughter to be my wife. Have you any objection?"

"As master pleases," said the ayah, casting her eyes down that he might not catch sight of the gleam of intense satisfaction that might be read in them.

Marriage for Violet! With the big master of the Stores! It was beyond her dearest hopes. If he had proposed taking the girl as his mistress, she would have consented. But his wife!

"Violet very good girl. Will do what master wishes. Never giving any trouble, that child! What day master taking Violet to church?"

"Next Friday I shall go to Madras. I have business with the firm at headquarters. Violet will go with me. On Saturday morning after I have transacted my business we shall be married. I have the licence ready. On Monday I shall bring her back. You will get the room ready that your mistress had. There will be no other change. Violet will remain Miss Joan's nursemaid. She will take her meals with me as usual and she will use her present bedroom as her dressing-room, keeping her clothes there."

"Yes, sir," said Mariama.

If he had proposed any other arrangement the ayah might have bargained. In this case nothing of the sort was necessary. A wife was not paid to fulfil her duties. Violet would have her opportunities, when she returned, of getting all that she wanted from her husband. Mariama was turning away with a salaam when he stopped her.

"About the two babies. Isn't it time they were weaned?"

"Next month the amahs can be paid off if master pleases."

"When the amahs go, the children must each have an ayah."

"Yes, sir."

"They will be under your supervision the same as if their mother was alive."

"Yes, sir."

"See about getting what is wanted at once. You can go."

Belton turned away to his desk and began to look through his letters. There was very little of the prospective bridegroom's elation in his heart, as he made his business-like arrangements. He had grown used to Violet's companionship.

She was a pretty girl with pleasant manners. If he had not been brought up by rigid parents who considered irregular connections a disgrace, he might have been contented with a less binding tie.

He knew, however, that he could never reconcile his conscience to doing a woman a wrong and cheating her out of her rights. He intended to treat Violet fairly and honestly. As for being in love with her, he smiled at the notion. His one and only love had been Marjorie. No other woman would ever take her place. Even as his wife, Violet would never be otherwise than his servant, a member of his establishment who was necessary for his physical comfort. It was a mercenary arrangement.

The programme was carried out, and Godfrey salved his conscience by giving Violet a trousseau suitable for her position; by abolishing her caps and aprons and by bestowing upon her some bits of jewellery that pleased her.

They returned and each took up the familiar duties again. They had been dropped for only forty-eight hours, and were resumed with absolutely nothing to mark the event that had altered their relations and their lives.

CHAPTER EIGHT

(I)

THE marriage made no difference in the daily routine of their lives. Joan was too young to comprehend the alteration of relationships. Each member of the household followed in the groove that had been initiated by Marjorie herself.

Violet had all along been attracted by the vigorous, masterful Englishman who ruled the house. She allowed herself to fall desperately in love with him. He knew nothing of her real feelings. If she gave way to a shy little exhibition of passion, he put it down to her mixed blood. There was no reciprocation on his part. Having satisfied his natural desires, he left her and forgot her existence.

If the girl made any public demonstration of her emotion, she found a curious little opponent in Joan. The child was jealous and did not scruple to show it. When Violet protested, she was reminded of her former position.

"Mayn't I love your Daddy?" Violet asked.

"He's your master. He's not your Daddy, and you can't love him as I do."

"Don't be silly, Joan," said Godfrey rather sharply. "Don't make a nuisance of yourself. I shall kiss Violet when I like."

But the kisses were too few and possibly too cold to satisfy the passionate girl with the warm Eastern blood in her veins. What Joan would have said and thought if Godfrey had attempted to explain that Violet was no longer her nursemaid, but her stepmother, he did not dare to ascertain. The child, loyal to the mother who had forsaken her, would have repudiated the relationship in furious wrath.

As for the opinion of the staff, he did not ask for it. It was immaterial to him what they thought of his unexpected marriage. He was not ignorant of how alliances with the country-born were regarded. He avoided all intimacies with the employees, and when they inquired politely if their wives should call on his bride, he put them off

with a definite negative which did not encourage them to persevere.

It was known that he had married a girl of mixed blood. No one blamed him for it. It was impossible for him to go to England to find a wife. He could not leave the Hyderabad Branch of the Stores just as it was nearing completion. When the five years were up he would be able to go home with an easy mind. The place would be in full working order by that time, and any manager with experience would be able to carry on without difficulty. But he still had more than a year to serve to complete his engagement with the directors.

The day would come when Joan would have to go home to her aunt for her education. He would have to take her himself. He did not propose in his own mind to take Violet as well. She and the twins could be left with Mariama until his return.

But he had little time for thinking about his own personal affairs. His mind was busy upon a new scheme which had been introduced on his advice.

Shop-windows in an Eastern town with a tempting display of goods behind plate-glass were impossible. The great glare of light ruined the goods and the fine dust in the dry weather tarnished everything.

Some sort of an exhibition was absolutely needful for the sale of anything at home. It was, in Godfrey's opinion, equally necessary in the East, if it could be done without loss to the seller by deterioration of the goods.

He tried screening his windows with deep verandas. They protected the shop gazers as well as the goods from the rays of the sun. He erected airtight glass show-cases to help in forming the arcades. In these cases he placed glass and china, brass goods and occasionally silver ornaments. Prices were marked and a notice displayed to the effect that duplicates of the goods shown could be obtained inside the shop.

Peons in uniform stood by the windows ready to invite intending purchasers to enter, or to hustle away idlers who congregated in the welcome shade of the arcades and verandas.

Now and then a mechanical toy was exhibited in one of the windows. This attracted some of the richer inhabitants. They were eager to possess the wonderful object for the harem or the zenana.

A wooden lay figure dressed in Indian costume with imitation jewellery was a great "draw." Its clothes were bought

from its back over and over again. The dummy of a gosha lady deeply veiled was an even greater attraction.

Then a stuffed tiger appeared led by a gorgeously appressed image of a shikar wallah. Not only was the uniform of the man bought with his rifle and hunting-knife, but a sudden demand arose for stuffed beasts of the jungle. These were only within the reach of the very wealthy. But the chief city of the Nizam's dominions held immense riches.

A boom arose in mechanical musical instruments. The musical box has long been popular with Indians everywhere. A peculiar feature about their love of these is the fact that one or two musical boxes in a harem are not sufficient. A dozen at least are required to amuse the family. The fashion is to arrange them on a round table and set them all going at the same time. They are wound up by the harem servant, who is always inclined to be a bit of a tyrant.

If the women have given this autocratic person trouble by quarrelling among themselves, and "pinching" each other's property, he clears away the mechanical toys and musical boxes and places them under lock and key.

The result of Belton's activities in the way of advertisement was highly successful and gave him infinite satisfaction. He was always devising fresh "stunts" that he thought would attract. Each one that came up to his expectations brought fresh grist to the mill.

One day Godfrey returned home complaining of a bad headache. Violet heard the brougham drive up earlier than the usual time. She hurried to the portico to greet her husband, as was her custom.

"I've been too long in the sun this morning," he said, as he came wearily up the steps.

"How was that? Didn't you have the peon with an umbrella?"

"He was there all right, but he kept getting in my way and I told him to stand aside."

"What were you doing?"

"I was out in the street superintending an extension to the verandas. I want to show some of these new small motor-cars. We can import them for something considerably less than they can be bought in Bombay. It kept me in the full glare of the sun having to stand in the street."

He passed his hand over his brow and asked if the ice had come.

"You must lie down," she said, linking her arm in his and leading him to the bedroom.

Under Mariama's direction, crushed ice was applied. His appetite had left him. All he wanted was quiet and rest. He dosed himself with aspirin and closed his eyes for sleep.

"Don't stay, Violet. Keep those children quiet. I shall be better when I have had forty winks."

She stood anxiously gazing at him, which only served to increase his irritation.

"Please go," he said. "I have had a touch of the sun more than once before this. I shall be all right to-morrow. Tell the coachman that I shall not want the brougham again to-day."

There was little else to be done beyond keeping the house quiet. Violet and Joan went for the usual evening drive, leaving Mariama to look after the master. When they came in they had dinner; then the little girl went to bed and was tucked under the mosquito curtain. She saw nothing of her Daddy, who was reported to be asleep. She consoled herself with Fluffie, who occupied the basket under the cot.

The next morning Godfrey was in a high fever. The civil surgeon had to be summoned. There was no possibility of going to the office. Mariama forsook the nursery, where the two young ayahs who had succeeded the amahs were quite capable of carrying on. Violet was in and out of the sick-room frequently. It was difficult to dispose of Joan and keep her quiet.

The fever increased, and Godfrey sank into semi-consciousness. Mariama did all she could. She was not without experience in sick-room nursing; but there was actually little to do. What was necessary was done well and entirely to the doctor's satisfaction.

On the second day the medical man paid two visits and spoke of sending the invalid in an ambulance to the hospital at the military station. The journey there would be a trial. It might be better to procure a nurse if one could be obtained.

On the third day the doctor came to the house three times. During the last visit Godfrey passed away without having recovered consciousness.

(2)

Belton's rather sudden death was a shock to everyone who knew him. It was also a great loss to the firm. James

Murray, who was at Bellary, hurried to Hyderabad and took charge of Belton's office. He also visited the bungalow and placed all private papers under lock and key.

He made the acquaintance of the second Mrs. Belton. Poor Violet had wept herself blind. She had flung herself on her bed and refused to get up. Joan tried in vain to rouse her.

"Your Daddy is dead! Your Daddy is dead!" was all the child could get from her. It upset Joan, and she added her wailing to the widow's. Mariama came to the rescue, scolding her daughter for not controlling herself, and drawing away the distressed child. The appearance of Murray, who was a stranger to Joan, created a diversion. He talked to her and promised a box of toys from the Stores.

"Let Mrs. Belton lie quietly where she is," said Murray, as Mariama tried to rouse Violet and get her to sit up. "She will recover when the first paroxysm of grief is over."

He went back to Godfrey's study, the ayah following.

"You will be responsible to me for looking after these children. I shall pay your wages, and you will continue in this bungalow for the present. Raju will do the house-keeping as usual and provide the food required for Mrs. Belton and the children."

Murray looked at the two babies with interest. They were fine, healthy children and did credit to Mariama's care. From their appearance he judged that he might safely leave them where they were.

Before any different arrangements could be made it would have to be ascertained what were the legal rights and responsibilities of the stepmother. She might not be willing to part with the children.

Supposing that she was willing to hand them over to some other guardians, where should he, Murray, find such a guardian? He knew of no one who was able to befriend them and take them in. The residential quarters were too small to allow of visitors.

The acting manager went into Violet's room and regarded her anxiously. He knew how trouble affected the country-born. There was no courage to stand against misfortune, to fight it and rise superior to it. Mariama followed him into the room. He turned to her.

"I think that you had better let the doctor see your daughter," he said.

"She's all right; only very very sorry. That child too fond of Mr. Belton."

"All the same, I think she needs attention. A tonic might rouse her and do her good."

He was not in a position to order it. He could only give advice.

Godfrey Belton was buried the day after his death. Once more his family settled down into the routine of their daily life. Joan fretted for her absent Daddy. Since her mother's death, Godfrey had seen a good deal of his daughter. On one occasion Murray, who had little time to spare, found her sobbing her heart out because Daddy hadn't been to see her for such a long time. He could do very little to comfort and console. He sent her a large box of toys from the Stores, and they helped to divert her attention. There were a Teddy Bear and a box of bricks apiece for the twins, and Joan had the additional excitement of showing the babies how to play with them. Their greatest pleasure was in knocking down any erection she made.

Violet failed to pick up as she should have done. The prospect of maternity in the future complicated affairs. Her hopes were eventually frustrated, a circumstance her mother did not regret although Violet herself was upset by it.

At the end of three weeks the girl followed Belton to the grave. *The three little English children were now in the strange position of being orphans in the guardianship of a pure bred Indian woman who could and did call them her grandchildren.*

Murray had communicated with Mrs. Oakley, Godfrey's sister, on the death of Belton. He asked her to let him know her wishes as to the disposal of her nieces. It would be best for the children to ship them off to England as soon as possible. It took time for his letter to reach her, and even if she wrote by return of post some weeks would elapse before her reply could be received.

Olive was quite ready for them, but how were they to be sent home? All she could suggest was that some paid escort might be found in the shape of a nurse returning to England who would be glad to look after them in return for her passage.

Murray was fully aware of the difficulties connected with sending orphans on a long voyage under the care of a complete stranger.

Joan was nearly eleven, and the two little girls, Phillis and

Faith were a year and a quarter. They could not walk properly, and their vocabulary was limited. It was Joan who suffered most. She was too old to be under the thumb of the old ayah, who was given to be tyrannical now that she was mistress of the situation. She was apt to consider that Joan could not do better than act as nursemaid to her little sisters. Mariama dismissed one ayah, and she and the other undertook all the duties of the nursery.

Murray, finding that Belton had left very little money behind him, reduced expenses wherever it was possible. The carriage with its horse was sold, and Joan never left the compound.

A couple of months passed, and the order came for the evacuation of the bungalow. A new manager was appointed. It was unfortunately not Murray himself. He had only been acting for Belton. If he had been chosen he would have kept the children in the bungalow until arrangements were completed for their dispatch to their aunt.

Mariama made no objection to parting with the children. She was beginning to find the responsibility of their care too much for her. The health of the twins was not good. They were teething and in consequence fretful and restless. Faith seemed to suffer more than Phillis. She showed symptoms of other childish ailments and lost flesh.

One day Murray drove to the bungalow, burdened with the disagreeable task of finding another home for the children. Also he was obliged to dismiss Raju and his underlings. They would all find new situations without difficulty. He was not concerned on their behalf. But he wondered how Mariama would cater for Joan, who was beyond the simple diet of bread and milk, which sufficed at present for her sisters.

On arrival at the bungalow, Murray found, somewhat to his relief, that Mariama had anticipated his orders and had departed. She had settled into a small bungalow not far from the Stores. Thither he drove at once. The house was clean and tidy. The children were playing in a shaded veranda, and he could find no fault with the arrangements. He sat down and watched them while he talked with Mariama.

"I shall have to return to Bellary as soon as I have given over charge to the new manager," he announced.

"Is the new gentleman from Bellary?" she asked.

"No, he has come straight out from home to carry on

Mr. Belton's scheme of advertising. You will have to manage without me."

"Can do if I have money."

"I'll send you the money all right for your expenses while you are here. I have written to the matron of the Civil Orphan Asylum in Madras and have asked her if she can take the children as boarders till we can find an escort for them."

"Master satisfied?" she asked. "I doing my best."

"Your very best, ayah! But the money is running out. You can't afford to keep up a home for them without money."

"I very poor woman. No money got!"

"You will be ready to give up the children?"

"Yes, sir. Very nice place, Civil Orphan Asylum. They will be quite happy there."

"You must take them down to Madras by train when I have fixed it all up. I will give you the tickets. I shall also give you a present as well as your pay, for you have done very well by the poor little things. What are you going to do after the children have gone?"

"Find another place with English lady. Must do something or I starve."

At the end of a fortnight the children were taken by Mariama to Madras. The matron met them at the station.

"Ayah says that you have lots of nice children for me to play with," remarked Joan with an effort to be brave.

The matron reassured her on the point and promised that she would have a delightful time. The ayah was carrying Phillis in her arms. She handed her to the matron. The child was just old enough to be shy. She clung to Mariam and began to cry. Joan looked a little frightened and asked if the ayah was not coming too.

"Not now, dear," said Mariama soothingly. "Ayah must go and look after the luggage. Coming back directly."

She was turning away in a hurry when the matron stopped her.

"Where's the other child?" she asked.

"Only one got besides Miss Joan."

"Which is this?" asked the matron, puzzled.

"That one is Phillis," said Joan. "She's my baby. Daddy gave her to me as he didn't want both."

"Mr. Murray wrote to say that I was to expect three, Joan, Phillis, and Faith. Where is Faith?"

"She has gone to Daddy and Mummie and Violet."

The matron's attention had been fully engaged in trying to pacify the crying child. When she looked up to make more inquiries of the ayah, the woman had vanished. She had slipped into the crowd of chattering Indians who were pouring from the railway carriages.

There was nothing more that the bewildered Matron could do but get to her own conveyance, a roomy bullock coach. The two children and their small travelling bag were packed inside by a helpful peon, and the matron returned to the Civil Orphan Asylum with her two charges.

CHAPTER NINE

(I)

THE matron duly informed Murray of the safe arrival of the children. He had mentioned three, Joan, and the two twins, Phillis and Faith.

There was no child named Faith. The ayah had gone off directly she had been relieved of her charges. It was from Joan the Matron had gathered that Faith had lately died from the effect of teething. Joan declared that she had "Gone to Daddy," and that someone came and took her away.

This the Matron reported without raising any doubt on the statement, and Murray accepted it as correct, determining to speak seriously to Mariama about her omission in not informing him of the fact. He was anxious to get back to his own appointment. The new manager was loath to part with him. He knew nothing of the language of Hyderabad and was constantly asking for guidance. Murray was up to his eyes in the legitimate work of the Stores and had little time to spare for hunting up a lost baby.

He did not, however, put the matter aside. He summoned the peon and ordered a search to be made for the old ayah. He also drove to the little bungalow occupied by Mariama. He found an Indian family in possession. They could tell him nothing. The late occupant had paid the rent, which was small, and had left the place. Mariama's property, consisting of a couple of small tin boxes, had been removed.

The young ayah's personal belongings had also been taken away. Nothing remained but an old broom and a bucket that leaked. The sweeper who cleaned out the place had not thought them worth carrying away.

At the end of a week the peon reported that no trace of the old ayah could be found. He had been fortunate in discovering the young ayah just as she was on the point of departing by train for Madras.

She was persuaded on the promise of a small present to break her journey and put it off for a few hours. The peon

took her to Murray at Bellary, and her husband with her. The latter was a domestic servant who was also seeking employment. Murray put the woman through a close examination, making her give an account of all that had happened up to the time of her separation from the child.

Yes, it was quite true what Miss Joan had said, she averred. Miss Faith had suffered from fever and dysentery while teething. The bungalow was small and hot, and it made the little missie ill. The old ayah did what she could, but the end came rather suddenly. The child had convulsions and was gone before they could send for the doctor.

"Where was the child buried?" asked Murray.

"Old ayah Catholic religion. She take the box to her priest. He say prayers and put box in a deep hole."

"Did he give Mariama a certificate, a paper, about the burial?"

"Asking too much money. Ayah telling that the child's father and mother both dead. She was grandmother only. She was one very poor old woman and not wanting certificate."

There was a small Goanese mission in Hyderabad. It was run by brothers of that church who were ordained in Goa. They were Indians by birth and language and required no European head to govern their little community.

The ayah represented the child as a granddaughter of Indian birth. The priest asked few questions. A death certificate was not necessary under the circumstances.

The young ayah was uneasy under cross-examination. She was in a great hurry to get to Madras, and it was with relief that she escaped from the custody of the peon. He was a dignified Muhammadan, whose contempt for the Hindu pariah was visible in every action and word.

Murray duly reported that Faith had died suddenly of convulsions while teething, and Mariama had buried her as her own grandchild. As far as he could see, everything was in order.

At the same time, he promised to let the Matron know as soon as he could find a competent escort to England for the children. He would advertise. He begged her to make every inquiry that was in her power in Madras.

(2)

Joan and Phillis were happy enough at the Civil Orphan Asylum. Most of their companions had a touch of the country in their blood. It was recognized at once in the Asylum that the new boarders were *pucka* and that there was no colour in their fair skins.

When this fact was established they were immediately regarded as superior beings. They were under an additional advantage in not being the recipients of charity. Some big gentleman up-country was paying for them. They would only be at the Institution temporarily. At the end of their visit they were to go "home" to England. There was a world of meaning in that expression "home." Which one of all that crowd of children would ever have the luck to go to England, the land to which they belonged if they could have their rights?

Joan, as was natural to her masterful disposition, queened it among them and accepted the worship they gave. Phillis, still ailing with her teeth, was mothered by the Matron herself in her own quarters. From the bevy of elder girls one was chosen to act as nurse. She would be leaving the Institution before long, and it was her ambition to take a situation as nursemaid in an English family. Here was an opportunity of learning something of her future duties.

Three months passed before a suitable woman could be found who was willing, in exchange for her passage home, second class, on a mail boat, to take charge of the two children.

There was much lamentation at their departure.

(3)

Mrs. Oakley met her nieces at the docks. She expressed surprise at the arrival of only two. She had prepared for three, and in spite of the number she had already decided, having no children of her own, that she would keep them herself.

Olive had been successful in her venture, which she continued to manage after her marriage with the house-agent. She had plenty of room for the little people. Joan of course would have to go to school before she was much older. It

would have to be a boarding school or she might be spoilt if she were allowed to run wild in a private hotel. But, first of all, the little girl must settle down to English life and learn the discipline of an English house. Servants would not be at her beck and call. She would have to make her own bed and keep her own room dusted and in order.

Mrs. Oakley thanked the nurse who had brought them home and asked if anything was owing for her services. It appeared that Murray had settled with her before she left India and had given her a generous cheque.

"Did he say anything about the missing twin?"

"I did not see Mr. Murray. I picked the children up at Bombay. He was too full of business to be able to get away. He arranged everything by letter."

"Who brought the children to Bombay?"

"A very nice woman. She was the Matron of the Civil Orphan Asylum, Madras, who took care of them till they could be sent home. There wasn't much time for talking. I went on board at once, as I wished to get settled down in the cabin before we got out to sea. We had a comfortable cabin to ourselves. The children proved excellent sailors. We were very happy, weren't we, Joan?"

"Yes, and I wish you were going to stay on with us," she replied, heartily as she flung her arms round the nurse's neck.

"Some day perhaps I will come and see you," she promised vaguely, as she prepared to depart and go her own way.

By this time Joan and her sister seemed to have got used to their varied life. Olive had her hands full in fitting them out with suitable clothing. They both felt the change of climate. The air of the East Coast is bracing and cool at all times of the year. Joan was very happy and interested. The shops were a delight, and the number of white faces in the streets a never-ending wonder.

"Where are all the coolies, and who does all the work?" she asked more than once.

In India the Britisher was a sahib. He never did manual labour. If anything had to be lifted or carried the peon must be summoned and he would call the necessary coolie.

When the novelty of the English life subsided, the little chatterbox Joan had time and opportunity to tell Auntie of her life in India. She remembered her Mummie well and

her dear Daddy. She also had a great deal to say about Violet.

Godfrey had not kept his second marriage from the knowledge of his family. Olive was aware that Violet was her brother's wife, although Joan always spoke of her as "my nurse." She called the old ayah Mariama, when she did not speak of her as the ayah.

"Tell me about poor little Faith," said Olive one day, when she and Joan had driven down to the sands.

The sea was a never-ending delight to the child, but it was nearly a mile from the house, and the visits to the beach could not be very frequent.

"The two babies came when we least expected them," said Joan. "Mummie was in bed not feeling very well. Daddie had gone to office. Violet and ayah were both busy in Mummie's room with a new nurse who had come to help in getting out some house linen. I was the only one to look about and see who came to the house. Even the bungalow peon had gone off somewhere all in a hurry. I think the babies must have come in the dhoby's basket. Oh, my! It did surprise me to hear them when they cried!"

"Don't say 'Oh, my,' Joan."

"Violet always said it. So did the children at the Institution. When Daddie came home he took me into Mummie's room to see the babies. I told him that he didn't want two little girls all to himself, and he agreed to divide them. He gave me first choice, and I took Phillis. The other had no hair on its head. I expect the makers hadn't time to finish it. Daddy said he didn't mind which he had. I named mine Lovie, and he called his Dovie. The ayah said that his was the best because it was going to have light hair. But it wasn't the best. The ayah is good at her work, so Mummie said, but she is a verree stupid old woman."

"Not 'verree,' dear. We say 'very' in England."

"Yes, Auntie, very," and she repeated the word several times. When Joan had got it to her satisfaction she continued her tale.

"Perhaps when her hair grew she would have been prettier than Phillis," suggested Aunt Olive.

"It began to grow before we lost her. It looked yellow, like gold, when the young ayah brushed it. Dovie's eyes were blue, like the blue on my china cup."

"Dark people always like blue eyes and yellow hair," remarked her Auntie.

"I think they do. The Palace Agent did."

"Who was he?" asked Mrs. Oakley, suddenly roused.

"A big tall Indian gentleman who brought us boxes of Turkish delight. He bought Turkish delight for the people in the Nizam's palace. Daddy knew him very well. He bought chocolate at the Stores. Sometimes he came to the bungalow to see Daddy on business. Whenever he came he asked to see us. Daddy said that he was very fond of children. He used to wear an embroidered satin coat and satin pyjamas, and oh, my!—" Joan put her little hand over her mouth at the slip she had made and squirmed with laughter. "Sorry, Auntie. I won't say it again if I can remember."

"All right, darling. You will soon grow out of it. Tell me more about the Indian gentleman. Did he wear a turban?"

"Yes, and it had diamonds and pearls in it. He used to bring us all sorts of pink sugar cakes, as well as boxes of Turkish delight. Violet loved them. She was very greedy over them and eat more than her share. Old ayah said that they were too rich for us, too much sugar and butter in them."

"She was quite right."

"After Daddy died, Violet went away, and Faith's ayah went away, and we were left with the old ayah and the other young one who looked after Phillis. Then we moved into a tiny house. There were rats in the roof, and the young ayah said that snakes came after them and ate them. When the snakes caught them, oh—!" She clapped her hand over her mouth and laughed at the slip so nearly made. "The rats squeaked and ran along the beams of the roof."

"Were they poisonous snakes?"

"No, they were common rat-snakes, but I didn't like them, though the ayah said that they wouldn't do us any harm. Once a big rat fell nearly on to the top of my head, and I was frightened. I screamed, and when the Palace Agent came to see us I told him all about it. I asked if he could give us a bigger house. He promised to do his best, but we had to stop in the little house till we went to the Institution. That was better, ever so much better. I loved the Matron and the girls. And now, Auntie, I love you."

The little hand found its way into Olive's, and a brown head was pressed against the childless woman's breast. Both the children were creeping into her warm heart.

As for Harry Oakley, he was equally pleased to welcome them. They satisfied a natural craving for something that had hitherto been missing in his own placid existence. He was doing well in his agency, with his commission on the turnover as well as the regular salary that he received. Now he had someone to work for and to save for, his two little nieces, as pretty a pair as any uncle could desire.

Olive remained silent and thoughtful after Joan's description of the last house in which she found herself. She wondered how much the poor little souls had been obliged to rough it. She gathered that, though so poorly lodged, they were properly fed and cared for. After all, Mr. Murray was in a way looking after them as far as he was able. He would not have allowed them to suffer or be neglected. But the children could not have been comfortable, since Joan expressed her pleasure at being taken to the Civil Orphan Asylum, where she was much happier.

Mrs. Oakley was aware that Murray had been unable through pressure of business to write the trivial details of the lives of the children. It had been all he could do to make the arrangements for their well-being. He had been obliged to trust Mariama with the care of them and to find the means necessary for it. He had fully satisfied himself that she had done her best, kept them clean and nicely dressed, properly fed and out of the sun. He had seen them occasionally and had assured himself that all was well with them.

The nurse who brought them home was Olive's only source of information, and she had got her news from the Matron from whom she took over charge. The one person who could have given further details was the old ayah, and she had disappeared before she could be properly cross-examined.

Joan broke into Olive's reverie.

"I liked the Palace Agent, Auntie."

"Did he come often to see you?"

"Three or four times after we went into the little bungalow. He always talked to me while he played with Faith. He smoothed her hair down so gently and said: 'Pretty blue-eyed, golden-haired maiden. Do you love your Palace Daddy?' and then he kissed her just as Daddy used to do."

"What did Faith say?"

"Oh, Auntie! Faith couldn't talk. She could only say Dadda! Dadda! and laugh. He was pleased when she called him Dadda."

"Wasn't she frightened of an Indian with a dark face?"

"The Palace Agent didn't have a dark face," cried Joan, with disdain at her aunt's ignorance. "He wasn't as brown as Violet. His face was pale brown, and his eyes were big and brown, not a bit like Violet's or ayah's. They had small, black eyes. I couldn't see his hair because he always wore a turban. Faith loved the Palace Agent and always held out her arms to be taken up."

"Did he like Phillis?"

"He liked us all, of course. He was Daddy's friend. One day he said to me: 'Will you let Faith come and stay a few days with me?' I said: 'Yes, but not for long.' I had told him all about the rats and snakes in the roof and how frightened we all were when the rats squeaked. He said there were no rats in his house. Then he spoke to the ayah. It wasn't her fault about the snakes. He gave me a big box of chocolates which the ayah said I might eat, and he gave the young ayah some rupees, and I think the old ayah as well. Then he said: 'I will take the child with me now.' 'But you must bring her back before we go down to Madras,' I said. He laughed. 'All right, little lady, you shall have your sister back in plenty of time.' He carried Faith to his carriage, and she loved going."

"And he brought her back?"

"It was a few days before we left Hyderabad. But, Auntie, she was ill. He had wrapped her up in a beautiful silk shawl. He said she was asleep, and he laid her down on her bed very gently so that he shouldn't wake her."

"Did Faith cry?"

"She was asleep. She couldn't cry. She just went on sleeping, and the ayahs told me not to make any noise. They sat down and talked and talked. They thought I didn't know their language, but I did."

"What were they saying?"

"That the Palace Agent's wife had given Faith sleeping medicine. The young ayah said that it was a good thing and would make her well. But the old ayah didn't like it. She said that we white children weren't accustomed to sleeping medicine. The next day Mariama took Faith away. She said she was going to see the doctor. Two days afterwards we

went down to Madras, and the old ayah said that she had been obliged to leave Faith with the doctor, as she wasn't well enough to travel so far. It was a long journey, Auntie, and awfully hot."

Joan rambled off about the children at the Institution, and Olive could get nothing more out of her. Putting one thing with another, Mrs. Oakley came to the conclusion that Faith had died the night after the Palace Agent brought her back. It was not to the doctor that she was carried but to the native cemetery, where Mariama buried her as her own grandchild.

CHAPTER TEN

(I)

MRS. OAKLEY was a busy woman and had little time for puzzling over problems that were beyond the limits of her country life. No one was able to give her advice, or had time to spare for anything outside the limits of a prosperous farm. The time slipped away, and the incident of Faith's death sank into oblivion.

Joan was sent to a large school at Southwold, a town on the same coast within easy reach. Phillis was still young enough for the kindergarten education that the nursemaid was capable of giving.

Old Benjamin was gradually leaving the business of stock-raising, beet-growing and house-building to his two sons and his son-in-law. He showed little interest in his granddaughters. One day when Olive had driven over to the Hall, taking Phillis with her, she ventured to speak to him on the subject.

"You ought to be thankful, Father, that Godfrey's children are pure white. If Violet and he had lived they might have had a large family of little dagoes."

"I wouldn't have had anything to do with them!" cried the old man mutinously.

"All the same, they would have been your grandchildren. Now, this little dear and her sister Joan are something to be proud of."

"Yes, they are pretty, I admit."

"And they get their good looks from their mother. Poor Marjorie, she was really beautiful. I wish she had lived!"

"So do I, and that's the truth!" replied the old man with unexpected warmth. "It was that scoundrel, her father, who upset me."

"You never forgot about the sow. The sow didn't do so badly, after all."

"But she was a lot older than what he said."

"She was wellnigh starved. That was what was the matter with her, poor old thing!"

"All the same, I was deceived. I might have done differently about Godfrey if it hadn't been for that old sow."

Phillis toddled in and clasped her grandfather's knees. She was not shy with him. The two were good friends, and Belton was fonder of her than he would admit.

"I suppose, Olive, that you haven't been able to do anything about the other twin?" he asked after a pause.

"I feel sure that she must have died."

"Joan says that she was carried off by an Indian gentleman with diamonds and pearls in his turban, on a visit to his house."

"We must remember that he was Godfrey's friend. Godfrey mentioned him several times in his letters, saying what a help he was. He probably didn't like to see the children in a bungalow haunted by rats and snakes. I wonder that he didn't take all three of them while he was about it."

Belton stood and regarded her intently.

"Olive!" he cried, with a note of sudden dismay in his voice. "Do you believe that Faith is still alive?"

"Oh, Father! How can I say? I don't know what to believe. If she is alive, surely we ought to do something."

"What can we do buried down here?" he demanded.

"Harry declares that we can't do anything. And we don't know what it might cost if we put it in the hands of an inquiry agency. They might have to send someone out to India, and who's to pay for it?"

"Oakley is right," said the old man.

"Harry feels morally certain that Faith is dead, that she died of convulsions, and that the old ayah buried her as her own grandchild."

"That was the statement made by the other ayah. I don't know why we should disbelieve it," responded Belton.

"There was nothing to prove it," said Olive. He was silent for some minutes. She could see that something was disturbing his mind. She gathered from his next words that he was far from being satisfied with the account of the child's death. It had not come direct from the old ayah, who was the only person to know the truth of it. The story had filtered through the matron and the nurse, neither of whom possessed first-hand information. Joan was the most reliable as a source of information, and she could only bring a child's intelligence to help in solving the mystery.

Belton had the last word.

“If she should turn up in the future, she ought to be provided for. If not, that scoundrel of the ‘Spotted Cow’ might claim her.”

(2)

Two years later Benjamin Belton was gathered to his fathers. He was very quiet latterly and spoke little.

Whether it was the sight of Godfrey’s orphans or the mysterious fate of one of them, Olive did not know; but she was of the opinion that he fretted over his son’s death in India and the strained relations that had existed when they parted.

It was for him, the older man, to have held out the olive branch. He had not done so. He had allowed Godfrey to leave the country without bidding him good-bye or attempting to heal the breach. Olive was inclined to believe that this fact preyed on his mind.

Joan was fourteen years of age and Phillis five when Belton died. He was not quite seventy. The doctor assured the family that he had suffered no pain. He had lived his life and done well for himself; and he had gone more or less suddenly. They found him in his last sleep in the morning.

His estate was considerable. Where most of his neighbours had failed or been impoverished by the hard times that were beginning to affect agriculture, Belton’s property, owing to his enterprise and energy, had improved. The colony of bungalows on the cliff had grown into a prosperous seaside town. It had been given the name of Beltonville. It owned a hotel, a pier, a group of good shops that were a boon to the neighbourhood. It was no longer necessary for the people of the countryside to drive or go by carrier into Yarmouth for supplies. It had a bracing climate, favourably regarded by progressive medical men as beneficial for their invalids. In addition to a good beach and the low sheltering cliff, the Norfolk Broads were within easy reach.

Belton had divided his estate equally between his four children. Godfrey being dead, his portion amounting to between thirty and forty thousand pounds was to be put into trust for his children, Joan, Phillis and Faith, if the last-named was still alive and could be found. Henry Oakley and Richard Belton were appointed guardians for the children until they were of age.

The funeral had taken place and the family party had assembled in the dining-room to hear Mr. Harrison, the family lawyer, read the will. Richard and Clement were the executors.

Olive rose from her seat under the impression that with the reading of the will the business was over.

"It is all very satisfactory, Mr. Harrison," she said. "The dear old Dad has done the right thing."

Harrison folded up the sheets of the document and took off his spectacles.

"One moment, Mrs. Oakley. I have something to say to you all."

They sat down again expectant.

"This mention of Godfrey's family by name may delay the winding up of the estate," announced the lawyer. "If he had named Joan and Phillis only, we might have proceeded, but Mr. Belton has mentioned his third granddaughter, Faith by name."

"She is presumed dead," said Richard, who knew more about stock-raising than law.

"Her death must be proved. We can't take anything for granted."

"And how on earth can you do that at this distance away and after the time that has elapsed?" demanded Richard.

"By inquiry," returned Harrison quietly. He looked at Olive. "Mrs. Oakley, can you give me the address of the firm which employed Godfrey?"

She was able to do this and to add that of the Stores' headquarters in London as well.

"A big firm," commented Harrison, who had heard of it.

"And my brother was helping to make it bigger. He was at the city of Hyderabad, opening up a new Branch in the Nizam's territory when he died," said Olive.

Harrison asked her for the details of Godfrey's private life. He expressed his astonishment at the singularity of the conditions.

"As far as I can gather," he said, after studying his notes, "the old ayah, the mother of Godfrey's second wife, was legally the stepgrandmother of these children. The question is, what was her real position out there, and what were her rights and liabilities according to the law of the native state in which they were living?"

"I know nothing about their legal position," said Olive.

"Nor do I," observed Richard.

Mrs. Oakley hesitated, began to speak, and then stopped.

"Yes? What do you suggest, Mrs. Oakley?" asked Harrison.

"It has crossed my mind more than once that the grandmother may have sold the child," said Olive.

"What makes you think that the old woman sold the child?" asked Harrison, alert at once.

"From something I gathered in Joan's story."

"I must see Miss Joan; where is she?"

"Nurse has taken them to the beach. They are coming here to lunch."

"Can you give me any dates, Mrs. Oakley?" He turned to Richard and Clement. "I don't think we need keep you any longer. Mrs. Oakley will give me all the information I want."

The two men rose from their seats with relief. They could ill-afford to be idle. Richard, as head of the house, repeated his invitation to lunch. Harrison was glad to accept it.

"There's a fast train this afternoon to London that I should like to catch," observed the lawyer.

"You can quite easily do so, and you will have time for an early cup of tea before you start. I'll drive you to the station myself," replied Richard.

The two brothers departed and left Olive to be put through a cross-examination. Harrison went back to his notes. He read aloud what he had put down.

"Tell me if this is correct. Twins born about eleven years after marriage. Joan nine years old at the time. Marjorie Belton dies a few days after the birth of the children. Six months later your brother marries the ayah's daughter, Violet. He dies in the same year. Day of the month?"

She gave it and he continued his catechizing.

"Then the second wife dies and the children are left to the care of the mother of the second Mrs. Belton, their step-mother. Who provided for them?"

"The man who was doing Godfrey's work temporarily most kindly interested himself in the family. He financed them from the small sum my brother left."

"His name?"

"Mr. James Murray."

"We must look him up. Is he still with the firm?"

"I believe so," replied Olive. "But some time has passed since all this happened."

Harrison was silent for a while deep in thought, during which he studied his notes.

"Who reported the death of Faith?"

"One of the ayahs. She declared that the child died of convulsions brought on by teething. It happened the night after the Palace Agent brought the child back," said Olive. "Faith had been staying with the Sahib's wife."

"I suppose you have had no certificate of death?"

"None. Her story was passed on to the matron of the Institution and from her it went to the nurse who brought them home."

"Where was the little girl said to be buried?" asked Harrison.

"In the Roman Catholic cemetery at Hyderabad belonging to the R.C. mission."

"We ought to find out without difficulty if any burial took place," remarked the lawyer. "It is very unlikely even in a native state that a Christian mission would make an interment without registration of the event."

"Faith was buried as the ayah's granddaughter. The cemetery brother might easily have taken it for granted that the baby was an Indian by birth," said Olive.

"Anyway, whatever nationality was mentioned, if the name Faith was given and the sex, and if the date of interment tallied, we might consider it sufficient with the testimony of the ayahs to establish identity. Do you happen to remember the old ayah's name?"

"It was Mariama. Godfrey spoke of her in one of his letters, written soon after his arrival at Bellary."

"It would facilitate matters if the child was registered as buried under the name of Faith, the granddaughter of a woman called Mariama. If we can get as far as that, I think we shall be able to establish the identity of your brother's lost little daughter," said Harrison, with some relief in his tone. "Do you happen to know if the ayah was fond of the children?"

"Very much so, according to my brother. She was an excellent servant."

"Mrs. Oakley, a sudden thought has struck me. Is it possible that the ayah herself has kept Faith? We must remember that the woman had lost everyone with whom she

had been connected, master, mistress, daughter, son-in-law, every individual upon whom she had any claim. A granddaughter able to earn would be a means of support in her old age."

Olive regarded him in sudden dismay.

"That would be worse than death, in my opinion," she said. "The ayah has no means of bringing her up."

"Unless she followed the same course which she had adopted in her daughter's case and placed Faith in an orphanage. It would be preferable," said Harrison, "to the child being absorbed into a Muhammadan family. If she were brought up in a harem, it would be in the Moslem faith. She would be gosha her whole life long, ignorant of her race and of her father's language and religion."

"Poor little darling! What a fate! Would she be well treated?"

"Petted and spoilt and married while still in her teens to a Moslem who wanted fair children, which I believe is a common ambition among them."

"And the children would all be Muhammadans?"

"Naturally. Your brother's daughter would be absorbed in the country and lost for ever."

"And I should have great-nephews and nieces who were to all intents and purposes Muhammadans. How appalling!"

"But you wouldn't know them nor even be aware of their existence."

(3)

At this juncture Joan, home for her holidays, and her little sister came in. They were to have dinner at the Hall and they were excited at the prospect, happily unaffected by the loss of a grandparent who had taken little notice of them. Joan was fourteen, no longer the simple and precocious child who had come home from the East three years ago.

Phillis had outgrown babyhood and was able to talk, also to run about and get into mischief, a very restless little person always on the fidget and never still. Neither of the children could be called shy. Harrison looked at the youngest with interest and wondered if the twin sisters were alike. Phillis he decided was pretty, promising to be better-looking than Joan when she was of age. Olive took her hand and walked off in the direction of the dining-room.

"I want to see your White Orpington fowls, Joan. Will you show them to me?" asked Harrison.

"I should love to; and the pigeons," she replied, leading him away.

"I want to go with Joan and that new man," cried Phillis.

"Nannie is calling for you, darling. Your milk is waiting, my masterful little pet!" and the protesting child was led away to other regions.

Having made the acquaintance of the pets and listened patiently to their respective histories, Harrison began his questions. It was difficult to keep the girl's attention on the subject, or to jog her memory. More than three years had elapsed since the events happened.

Joan was still able to describe the rats and snakes that haunted the roof of the small bungalow. She could also remember Faith.

"Faith was exactly like Phillis except that her hair was much lighter," she said. "It was just beginning to grow and show its colour."

"Did you miss her when she was taken away by the big Indian gentleman?"

"No, I had Phillis."

She described how she and her father had divided the two between them.

"Did the big Indian gentleman bring Faith back?"

"Yes, I think so. She was wrapped up in a shawl. Ayah said that Faith was very sick with her teeth. Ayah wanted to keep her quiet and wouldn't let me go into the room where Faith was being nursed."

"Did you mind?"

"No, she said Faith's head was badly paining. You see, I had Phillis to play with, so it was all right."

"Was Faith in the train with you when you went down to Madras?"

"No, we left her behind with the young ayah. They said that she was too ill to be moved and that she would come later when she was better."

"You never saw her again?"

"No, the ayah said that she went to Daddy and Mummie."

"Do you think that she died?" he asked, after a pause.

"I don't know. Perhaps she did. Or the Palace Agent took care of her. He was very fond of Faith and I think she liked him. She always cried to go to him when he came."

"Why did she like him?"

"We all liked him. He was so kind and he gave us such lovely sweeties. He used to put them in our mouths. It made the old ayah very angry. She said we should be sick if we ate them. But we weren't."

"What did you call him? What was his name?"

"I never heard his name. We called him the Palace Agent. He had to supply the palace people with chocolate and Turkish delight. Lovely stuff. I wish we could have some now."

"I'll try and bring you some next time I come. What was this man like?"

Joan gave a description of the Sahib, dwelling long on his turban, which had impressed her more than anything else. The memory of the pearls and diamonds was still vivid.

"Did the Palace Agent give the ayahs some money?"

"Sometimes, he was always kind to everybody."

"Joan, you are old enough now to understand things," said Harrison seriously. "I want you to tell me if you think that the Palace Agent took Faith away to his house for good, and that he gave the ayahs some money not to tell anyone?"

"He may have done so. I don't know what happened after we left for Madras."

"Anyway, you saw him bring her back before you left?"

"Yes, and put her on the bed."

"Did you hear her cry?"

"No, not once. She may have been dead all the time."

"I wonder!" said Harrison to himself.

The lunch bell rang and they went into the house.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

(I)

HARRISON made inquiries without delay at the London office of the Europe Stores. There was no difficulty in getting whatever information was available. It amounted to no more than he had already received from Mrs. Oakley; Godfrey's engagement with the date by the Board for a billet in Bellary, his place of residence in India, his second marriage, his death and burial.

The secretary suggested that perhaps a little more about Belton's personal affairs might be ascertained by further inquiries in India, not only at the office at Bellary, but also through the police. They might be able to trace the burial of the child at one of the mission cemeteries and find one of the ayahs.

"Can you give me the address of the man in your firm who acted for Mr. Belton when he was taken ill?" asked Harrison of the home secretary.

"The man who took over charge when Belton broke down was Mr. James Murray. He carried on until a new manager was appointed from home. Murray had his own work which he was not at all anxious to leave. He was manager of the Bellary Branch. I believe he was very good to the children. By the by, Murray is at home at this very moment. He is on short leave and will be returning before long."

"Good! It would simplify matters if I could see him."

"He is staying in London, so there ought not to be any difficulty about putting you in touch with him."

Murray's address was given and no time was lost in running him to earth. The two men met at the lawyer's office. Harrison explained the reason for asking him to call.

"Do you remember Godfrey Belton of your firm?" he asked.

"Rather! Poor fellow, he was cut off in the midst of his work. He was a great loss to us. He had so much enterprise. What has become of his children?"

"They came home to his people. We have the two safe in their aunt's care."

"There were three. Did they find out what became of the third?"

"It's about her that I want to talk to you," said Harrison. "You may be able to help me. The children's grandfather has just died leaving a considerable sum. Godfrey was dead. He therefore left the portion that should have come to his son to his three children."

Harrison related the history of the family and the complication that had arisen through Godfrey's second marriage, much of which Murray already knew. He also made it plain that there was a mystery about the fate of the third child which must be solved. It must be proved if possible that Faith was dead.

Murray could not help him much. He corroborated some of the facts. But after the children left Hyderabad, Murray lost sight of them. He was instrumental in procuring their removal to the Civil Orphan Asylum. He had been dissatisfied with the small house. The woman did her best, but it was not a suitable place for Joan. The surroundings were bad for her morally as well as physically.

Moreover, supplies were coming to an end. Godfrey's private means were small and the money, what was left of it, could not last much longer. The ayah had been entirely without resources of her own.

Three important questions were discussed.

Did Faith die, and was she buried as Mariama's grandchild?

Was she handed over to one of the inhabitants of the town for adoption?

Or did the ayah hide the child with the intention of keeping her, to turn her into a means of support in later years?

"The first question can be answered by reference to the mission brothers in charge of the registers of the cemetery," said Murray, who was becoming greatly interested.

"What about the second, virtually the sale of the child?" asked Harrison.

"The only person likely to wish to have Faith was the Palace Agent, Adam-u-din Sahib. From Joan's account, you say, he seems to have fallen in love with the little maid."

"But Joan declares that he brought her back. She was a witness to this. Whether the child was alive at the time, of course, she could not possibly tell," replied the lawyer.

"Only Adam-u-din Sahib could assure us on that point," said Murray.

"Then we come to the third question," continued Harrison. "It presents a problem that we may not be able to solve. It will be pitting our wits against a sly old Oriental. Our one hope is that if Mariama knows that the child is an heiress, she may come forward and claim an allowance. She can't do that without revealing her identity. Then she will have to establish her rights as the girl's guardian by reason of the step relationship. We may be able to combat this by the aid of the English law. The old man has made his eldest son and Oakley the legal guardians of the children."

"Do you know anything of the law of British India?" asked Murray.

"Nothing with regard to children and parents."

"Could you ascertain it?" asked Murray. "I am afraid I can't help you."

Harrison looked perplexed and troubled.

"If it had been in British territory, I might easily have done so. But we have to remember that all this happened in a native state," he said. "I should be very much relieved if we could prove the child's death. We shan't be much better off if the ayah has the child than if she had been sold to a Hyderabad family."

"How did you get the impression that she might have been sold?" asked Murray.

"I gathered it from Joan's story," replied the lawyer. "As she has grown older, she seems inclined to repudiate her accusation. She now says that she is confident that Faith died."

"Her first impressions are most probably correct," remarked Murray. "Did Joan ever mention the name of the man who visited them at the little bungalow?"

"She called him the Palace Agent. I asked her for his name. She could not remember it. She described him as a tall man who wore a beautiful coat and turban ornamented with pearls and diamonds. She saw him give money to the ayahs when he took Faith away in his brougham. He brought boxes of chocolate and Turkish delight for the children, which made a lasting impression on Joan."

"Turkish delight and chocolate," repeated Murray. "He was the buyer of sweets for the palace. The consumption in

the harem must be enormous, to say nothing of the rest of the establishment; a very lucrative business. It must have been the Sahib, Adam-u-din, one of our best customers at the Hyderabad Branch. I know him, of course."

"Was there any other purveyor of sweets to the palace?"

"None; Adam-u-din Sahib was the only man allowed to bring that kind of thing into the palace. His responsibilities were great. Sweetstuffs out there are a favourite medium for poisoning or drugging. Very little was bought elsewhere after we had opened the Branch. We used to import coco-nut and pistachio confections on purpose for the palace and, of course, still do so. We owe that bit of luck to Belton, who made friends with the Agent."

"Is Adam-u-din Sahib still alive?"

"Yes. The period we are speaking of is only three or four years ago. The Sahib, as they call him, is a very charming man, very popular with all alike. He has sent his son Hassan to England for education."

"I had better have his address," said Harrison. "Can you give it to me?"

"You're not thinking of writing to him and asking him straight out if he bought the child?" asked Murray in consternation.

"What else am I to do? I might inquire if the police could help me," said the lawyer, who had little sentiment in his work.

"Most decidedly you mustn't do anything of the kind. It would upset our operations completely. If by any chance the Sahib or any other Indian has Faith in his harem and hears that inquiries are being made, the child would be dispatched to some remote hiding-place where she would be out of reach for ever," replied Murray, in actual alarm.

"I don't know how else we can prosecute a search without asking questions. Can you put me on to such a thing as a good reliable inquiry agency?"

Murray laughed as he shook his head.

"Inquiry agencies good or bad don't exist in the native states. In this particular case we are up against gosha rules. You want information from the harem. Their privacy is protected by the strictest rules which are enforced by the women with even greater rigidity than is demanded by the men."

Harrison was silent. The difficulty of proving that Faith

was still alive was greater than he had anticipated. It was Murray who broke the silence.

"Is there anything more that I can tell you?" he asked.

"I shall be up against a very troublesome proposition if I am unable to procure the burial certificate. We shall then have to assume that the child is still living somewhere in India, which means that we shall have to continue the search."

"An expensive business as well as rather a wild-goose chase."

"There's plenty of money if it is required. The beneficiaries of the will would, of course, be glad to see the winding up of the estate, even though they have to pay for it. In these days no one wants to prolong law business."

"Where are Joan and her sister?" asked Murray.

"With their aunt, Mrs. Oakley, at Beltonville, not far from Yarmouth on the east coast."

"I'll take their address. If I can find time, I'll run down one day. I should like to see Joan again," said Murray.

"You're off to India soon?"

"In three weeks' time. I am going to take up Belton's situation at Hyderabad and do my best to continue on his lines. We have made a great advance since he died."

Harrison looked at him with a query in his eye.

"I wonder if you would help us," he said tentatively.

"I might be able, I shall be on the spot. I'll do anything I can for the sake of the children."

"Could you interview Adam-u-din Sahib for us? He seems to have been the last of Belton's friends who saw the child alive. Tell him that the girl has come into a small fortune. She will have more than £10,000 if she is alive."

"Money is no object with the Sahib. He is probably worth a million himself. However, I don't mind having a shot at it. Only I don't hold out any hope of success in that direction. More likely that the ayah has got her. That would be an easier job, if you ask me. The police would be able to help us. The woman will not have remained in Hyderabad. Too many Moslems there to please her."

"Was the young ayah questioned?" asked the lawyer.

"Yes. She declared that Faith died of convulsions and was buried by the old ayah as her granddaughter."

"If that could only be proved, I should be glad."

"I greatly blame myself for not having made further

inquiries," said Murray. "The young ayah said the child died, but this I did not learn until after the two others had left India. In fact, I was under the impression that three children went to Madras. You see, ayahs can't correspond and are not expected to do so. As soon as Joan and Phillis were deposited safely at the Civil Orphan Asylum, the ayahs left Madras. I ought to have seen the matron myself. But I was overwhelmed with Belton's work as well as my own. I gave very little thought to the children after I had provided for their safety."

(2)

A few days later Murray found time to run down into the eastern counties and spend a day with Olive. She was still at the private hotel, but was already making plans to hand it over to someone younger and more active than herself. Her brothers had asked her to come to the Hall and keep house. There was plenty of room for the children as well as herself and her husband.

Mrs. Oakley was to see Murray, whom she had never met before. She was aware of his kindness to the orphans and was glad of an opportunity to thank him in person. In talking to him, it seemed to bring her into close touch with her lost brother. She heard details of his work and of his death which could not very well have been written in a letter by a busy man like Murray.

Joan recognized him at once and greeted him warmly. Once more she was catechized, but nothing fresh was elicited. She could not be persuaded to charge her old friend, the Palace Agent, with having stolen her little sister. She was convinced that he had brought Faith back. Again she described how she had seen him come in with Faith in his arms and lay her down gently in her cot. The child had been very quiet and had not cried. But Faith was a good baby, always laughing if she were awake, and slept peacefully.

Mrs. Oakley discussed the three propositions which she and the lawyer had considered.

"What is your opinion, Mr. Murray?" she asked.

"I am inclined to believe that if the child is alive, it is in the keeping of the step-grandmother. The old woman will place her in some institution (perhaps in Madras itself, or she may go into another Presidency for safety), where Faith

would have a good education and be capable of earning enough to support her grandmother in her old age."

"She has no right to the child," exclaimed Olive angrily.

"That is just what we must find out," he replied.

"If we can discover that the child is claimed by the ayah, can we oblige her to give her up?"

"Possibly in the name of the guardians who have been appointed by your father. It might involve compensating the woman with an allowance. She would look upon it as a pension."

"How much would she want?"

"She would be contented with a pound a month. It would keep her comfortably without any necessity for her to work."

"That could be easily managed," said Olive, her mind relieved on the score of expense.

She gave her visitor a good lunch and afterwards took him and the children to the sands.

"Not very attractive scenery with our dull North Sea, but it is very healthy, so the medical men say," she remarked, as they descended the path to the beach.

"And how happy the children are!" he replied, as he watched them running down to the edge of the waves. "Joan is still young enough to help her little sister to build sand castles."

They sat on the soft sand under the cliff, protected from the wind. After a pause he said:

"Mrs. Oakley, I wonder if you would do a kindness to a man who was a good friend to your brother?"

"Of course I will? What is it?"

"The Sahib, Adam-u-din, has sent his son to England for his education. Will you invite Hassan down here sometimes for his holidays?"

"With pleasure. Where is the boy?"

"He is still at a preparatory school near London. He has to spend his holidays at the school. They are very kind to him, but it is not much of a change for a schoolboy."

"What age is he?"

"Twelve or thirteen. He is younger than Joan. He came to England when he was nine."

"Would he be a suitable companion for Joan?"

"Just as suitable as if he were an English boy. He is gentle and has nice manners, and has been long enough in England

to have adapted himself thoroughly to our ways. He is not dark in his complexion."

"Have you seen him since you have been at home?"

"Several times. He has spent the day with me more than once. Poor boy! He was so grateful. I am afraid he feels rather homeless. A boy can't make much of a home at school."

"I could put him up at once. The summer holidays are just beginning. He can spend them here with us."

"This will be doing the Palace Agent a great favour," replied Murray, pleased with the success of his effort.

They returned to the promised early cup of tea and Murray was duly driven to Yarmouth to catch the express.

A week later Hassan arrived, shy but self-possessed and immensely pleased with his invitation. In every respect but the pale olive complexion, Mrs. Oakley found him similar to the son of an Englishman.

Joan took to him at once. They spent most of their time on the beach. Hassan had plenty of pocket money. They flew kites, sailed boats and had all sorts of adventures paddling and were as happy as the day was long.

Phillis followed after them as fast as her fat little legs allowed. The nurse, a strong, kindly Norfolk girl, was never far behind.

All too soon the happy days were ended. Hassan was consoled by a warm invitation from Mrs. Oakley to spend the whole of the Christmas holidays with them.

The handsome Arab face beamed at her and at Joan from the carriage window of the London express, as he clung to her hand, his eyes alight with gratitude.

"It is good of you to ask me, Aunt Olive!" he cried. He had learnt to call her by the familiar name used by Joan and Phillis. "I shall come! I shall come! Don't look so sad, Joan. We shall soon be together again," cried Hassan, as the train drew out of the station.

CHAPTER TWELVE

(I)

THE Palace Agent, announced with befitting ceremony by a peon in the green-and-crimson uniform of the firm, entered Murray's office. The manager had returned to India and taken up his duties at Hyderabad.

The Englishman sprang to his feet. With a warm greeting he invited his visitor to take a chair.

"You have seen my son? What news can you give me of the boy?" asked the Sahib.

"Good news. You ought to be a proud father possessing such a lad. He is happy and doing well at work and at play. Next year his master tells me that he will be moving on to the public school that you have chosen for him."

"I hope so. He is to have the best education that I can give him."

"What are you going to do with him eventually, Sahib?"

"We can't decide that question till we hear how he gets on at the public school."

Murray told him of his visit to Yarmouth and of Hassan's introduction to the Beltons. Adam-u-din expressed himself pleased with the acquaintance and with the invitation. He had already received a letter from Hassan describing the delights of the seaside, and an enthusiastic description of Joan as a companion.

"I suppose she has grown considerably?" inquired the Palace Agent.

"Yes, and lost the weediness that comes of living in a tropical climate. She promises to be very pretty."

"Are the other children well, the twins?"

"Only Phillis is alive."

"What became of the other, Faith, I think they called her, a pretty little thing with blue eyes and golden hair?"

Murray explained the circumstances of her disappearance and of the death of the grandfather and the money left between the three daughters of his youngest son.

"The lawyers have to find if possible evidence of the death

and burial of Faith before they can wind up the estate and pay over the shares of the beneficiaries. If by any chance the child is alive, she comes in for over £10,000. If she is dead, her sisters inherit it."

"Has anything been done in the way of inquiry?"

"It has been ascertained for certain that no burial took place at the Roman Catholic cemetery that could possibly have been Faith's."

"That seems to rule out death," commented the Sahib.

"Now we have to find out if the old ayah has her, or if the woman has placed the child in some family——"

"What sort of family?" asked the Palace Agent, his brown eyes keenly searching the face of the British merchant.

"It has been suggested by the lawyers at home that she may have been given to an Indian family for a consideration."

"In other words, sold," said Adam-u-din quietly. "We mustn't mince matters. It is possible. It would not be the first time that a fair child, not of Indian origin, had disappeared, been absorbed into the family of another race. Faith was as fair as a golden Peri. You know that I carried her off from that dreadful hovel the old ayah had taken. I saw that she was very far from well and I thought that the large rooms of my house, together with the skilled care the child would have from my wife, might do her good. While she was with us Faith improved a good deal. She was the pet of the harem. When I returned her to the old ayah there was weeping and lamentation among my womenfolk! The child was still suffering from dysentery brought on by the teething. I would like to have kept her, but I was afraid of convulsions that so often follow dysentery. If anything had happened to the child in my house, I should never have forgiven myself. My wife gave her a soothing draught and I took Faith back."

Murray listened to the story in silence. It seemed clear and straightforward from beginning to end.

"Has any attempt been made to find the ayahs and hear from them the story of the child's death and burial?" asked the Sahib.

"They have been advertised for and a reward has been offered."

There was silence. The Palace Agent had nothing more to say except to renew his offer of help if it was needed.

"I wish I could be of more assistance," he said.

"You have been of great help——"

Murray stopped speaking. His face wore an expression of perplexity. The shrewd Oriental read him like a book.

"I see that you have still something on your mind," he said, quietly and persuasively. "Do let me help in solving this mystery. For my old friend Belton's sake I will do all that I can, even if it involves expense."

"It need not do that, thanks all the same. The lawyer is anxious to be assured that the child reached the small bungalow after it left your house. Was there any possibility of its disappearance on the way back?"

Murray felt that he was on delicate ground. He must walk warily. He was dealing with one of the firm's best customers. On no account must offence be given. The Palace Agent did not reply immediately. The manager gave him time to think over his answer and perhaps to jog his memory.

"The young ayah returned from Madras. She stayed on for a few days at the bungalow after they left. It is quite likely that she was taking care of the child until the old woman came back."

"That may have been the case," agreed the Palace Agent. "I can speak positively as to the return of the child from my house. It was to Mariama that I handed Faith, who was still under the influence of the medicine my wife had given her. I put the little thing in her arms and she placed her on the cot on her side. The woman was expert at handling a child. I told her that Faith had taken a soothing draught and then I left. Joan was in the veranda and watched me as I entered the carriage. That was the last time I saw Joan."

"It all sounds simple enough so far. The mystery begins after Faith left your hands. Between that moment and the journey of the other children to Madras we can't account for her. It is very puzzling."

"The ayahs will have to be found and closely questioned," said the Sahib.

Again there was a silence which Adam-u-din broke.

"Is it possible that the lawyer believes that I have the child hidden in my house?" he asked, with a smile of amusement in his eyes.

Murray paused while he considered whether it would be wise to be perfectly frank with his visitor, or whether he had better leave the question of suspicion alone. He decided that nothing would be gained by secrecy.

"It hasn't actually been suggested; but the question may arise if the old ayah denies the fact of the return of the child."

"Which she will do if she has stolen Faith herself."

Murray was still apprehensive that a storm of indignation might break out at any minute. It was with immense relief that he heard the Muhammadan continue in the same calm level tone which he had adopted throughout.

"I can quite understand that search should be made in every possible direction, however improbable the supposition that prompts it. I was apparently the last person to be associated with the child, and I ought to be able to give an account of everything connected with my actions. I suppose my word would be accepted by Mr. Harrison?"

"Of course! Of course!" exclaimed Murray hastily.

"The doubt in the lawyer's mind must be cleared up," said the Sahib positively. "There is only one way in which it can be done. Some reliable person must see every member of my family."

Murray knew all about the gosha rules that hedged in the harem and how much any intrusion into the women's quarters by strangers was resented. He felt bound to protest against extreme measures that were likely to give offence.

"Is it really necessary that your wife's privacy should be invaded? Why should not your word be accepted as sufficient?"

"It might satisfy the lawyers, but it would not satisfy me. If there remains any suspicion that the child is still in my house, I must insist for my own sake that a search is made. I cannot be left under an implication of this kind."

"How can it be managed?" asked Murray. "I won't consent to being a party to any action that may give offence to the ladies of your family."

"If you will trust me to make the arrangements, I can ensure its being done without any offence to either side."

Murray looked at him with incredulity. The Palace Agent continued:

"There is a small mission to the women of this country in Bellary. It is run by English ladies. We might ask the lady at the head of the mission, Miss Norton, if she will kindly pay us a social visit. I will take her to my wife's quarters and I will see that she is introduced to every member of my family, from my wife to the little niece, my brother's child. Since my brother's unfortunate death—he was drowned off

Japan in a typhoon—the girl and her mother have made their home with us.”

The suggestion was an immense relief to Murray as well as a surprise. He was warm in his expressions of gratitude.

“That’s very good of you, Sahib. Do you know Miss Norton?”

“I have had something to do with her in this way. She approached me on the subject of visiting my family. I thanked her, but declined. We parted very good friends.”

Again Murray thanked him.

“Anything that can be done—” began the Palace Agent. “But let me be quite straightforward with you. I take this action chiefly on my own account and not on yours. If there is any imputation on my name, I shall not rest until it is removed.”

(2)

The offer of a reward to any one of the ayahs who could give information of the existence of the English child, Faith Belton, or of her death and burial, was not without its results. The news was circulated in the bazaars frequented by the servants in Hyderabad and in Bellary, as well as in those military stations that were within reach by rail.

The gossip that is current among the domestics who serve the English is enormous, almost beyond belief.

The young ayah who had looked after Phillis was the first to present herself to Murray. She had found a situation with the wife of one of the staff in Hyderabad.

She maintained the story of Faith’s death and burial. The detail was minute and circumstantial down to the white jasmine flowers with which the little dead body had been adorned. The name of the cemetery was given.

The woman was unaware that inquiries had already been made, and that it had been ascertained that no burial took place at the date mentioned that could possibly have been Faith’s. Her tale was heard without comment and she was dismissed with a small present that satisfied her.

At the end of ten days a man asked to see Murray. It was Raju. He had found employment with one of the railway engineers living at Bellary. Raju was travelling boy and went with his master up and down the line.

Murray was glad to see him. He would probably glean

more information from him than from any one of the ayahs.

Raju had a vivid recollection of Mr. Belton, who had been a good master. He recalled the incidents relating to his life at Bellary and afterwards at Hyderabad. Mariama he declared was dead. After she was paid her wages she went to Bangalore to look for a situation. She seemed to have plenty of money, although Raju could not say where she procured it.

Murray pricked up his ears at this, but he could get nothing out of Raju to throw light on the source of her means.

At Bangalore she indulged too freely in her taste for ragi (millet, the grain common to the locality), and she died of surfeit. She was properly a rice-eater and the change of diet killed her.

"Had she the child Faith with her?" Murray asked.

"No. Faith was disposed of before the ayah left Hyderabad."

Murray questioned the man closely, but was unable to shake his story.

"If the ayah is dead, as you say, is there any reason why you should not speak out and tell the truth?"

"I am telling master true word only," protested Raju.

"But you haven't said anything yet about Miss Faith. You know something about her?"

"I only hear in the bazaar."

"What did you hear? What did they say in the bazaar? That Miss Faith was dead as well as the ayah?"

"No, sir, that child never die."

"If she didn't die, what became of her?"

"Can't tell, sir."

"Must tell or it will have to go into the hands of the police."

Raju looked startled, not to say frightened.

"Plenty of talk among the servants."

"Where? What is the talk? You may safely speak out as long as you say it to me. I am not the police."

"I can only tell master what people are saying."

"That the child is dead?"

"No, sir. They all saying that the old ayah sold the baby."

It was out at last, but something else had to be told.

"And who is said to have bought the baby?" Murray asked slowly.

"The Sahib Adam-u-din, the Palace Agent."

The statement carried no conviction. Here was one servant

vowing that the child was dead and buried, and another trying to persuade him that the baby had been sold. The first had been proved to be false. The second was likely to be equally false. Both rumours were founded on supposition based, the one on the sight of the child lying sick, the other on the fact that the Palace Agent had carried her away in his brougham.

"What do you believe yourself?" Murray asked.

Raju wriggled out of all responsibility for the truth of his tale.

"I can only tell master what the bazaar talk is."

This was as far as Murray could get. He gave Raju his fare and a small present of money. He pointed out that if his information led to the discovery of the child, he would receive a handsome reward.

Murray rejected the story of the sale of the child to the Palace Agent. Miss Norton's visit of inspection to the Sahib's harem would clear up any suspicion that might linger concerning his conduct.

At the same time the manager was at a loss to think of any other solution of the mystery.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

(I)

MURRAY was now occupying the house that had once been Godfrey's home. He had invited Miss Norton to be his guest for the short time that she would be in Hyderabad. The Sahib had offered to send his carriage to take her to the big block of buildings in Hyderabad City in which he lived.

There are many such houses in the old town. They are inhabited by rich men, many of them merchants trading to all parts of the world. Some hold office under the Nizam's Government. Some, like Adam-u-din Sahib, have appointments in the Nizam's palace. They are peaceful citizens, contented with their occupations and their relations with British India. It is strange to pass from the land which is under Western rule to a town that with a few exceptions remains to all appearances the same as it was in the Middle Ages.

The closed carriage drawn by a pair of fine horses pulled up at the doorway of the building. Miss Norton glanced up at the expanse of wall facing the street. It was blank and forbidding, with only a small shuttered window here and there, looking as if they had been introduced after the house had been designed. It was not peculiar in its appearance. There were many others like it in the street.

Miss Norton remained seated in the carriage. The Indians passing in the roadway stopped in curiosity to see what was happening at the great man's house.

After a delay of five minutes the door was opened by a peon, dressed in the white cotton coat and pyjamas worn by the servants of a Moslem household. He came to the door of the carriage, opened it and begged the Sahiba to descend.

"Is his honour here?" she asked. Her mission work in Bellary had made her familiar with the language and with the etiquette of such a visit.

"His honour is in the house. He is waiting for your excellency at the entrance of the women's quarters."

Slowly and deliberately she descended from the carriage.

The man salaamed, his subordinates following his example. He led the way into the building. The door immediately closed and the crowd of spectators in the street proceeded on their way.

The entrance-hall was small and narrow. It led into a passage and ended in a steep stone staircase. Her guide waved his hand to the stairs. She mounted the uncarpeted masonry, picking her way in the dim light over places where the edge of the stairs had crumbled away. They ended on a broad landing also devoid of carpet or furniture. Here she was met by the Palace Agent.

He shook hands with her and bade her welcome, courteously. The experience was not new. In the prosecution of her mission work she had met with similar receptions by the master of the house, who remained throughout the interview. It was rare for her to be allowed to enter a harem alone. She would gladly have dispensed with his company. In his presence the women were silent and nervous. If she asked them questions and tried to make them speak of themselves, he answered for them. On this occasion it was not the attention of the women that she was anxious to engage. She was there to use her eyes. If she had any queries to make, she must appeal to the Palace Agent himself. Murray had assured her that he was ready to give her any information he could.

Before the Sahib led the way into his wife's sitting-room, Miss Norton thanked him for the loan of his carriage. After a few complimentary expressions he went straight to the point.

"You are aware, Miss Norton, of your errand to-day?"

"I am to be introduced to your family, Sahib."

"Quite so; it has nothing to do with your own work."

"I understand. Mr. Murray made it clear."

"He told you that a search is being made for the child of Mr. Godfrey Belton. I knew him well when he was manager of the Hyderabad Branch of the Stores. I had frequent dealings with him and was on very friendly terms. I shall be glad to give the family every assistance possible in their search."

"That is very good of you."

"You can quite understand my anxiety to set the lawyer's mind at rest concerning the strange report which was current that I had purchased the child. It arose from my compassion for the poor little baby called Faith. She was only fifteen

or sixteen months old. She was ailing and wanted more fresh air than was to be had in the small bungalow which the ayah had taken. I should have liked to have had all three children, and put them in charge of my wife until they went down to the Civil Orphan Asylum. My wife is skilled in the care of children. They would have been very happy with her."

"Why didn't you adopt such an excellent plan, Sahib?"

"It was too great a responsibility. I did not see my way to having the ayahs as well. The daughter of the old ayah having married Mr. Belton, a curious complication had arisen which gave the ayah, Mariama, some authority over the disposal of the children."

"I think it could have been contested," remarked Miss Norton.

The Palace Agent made no comment on her suggestion. He pulled aside a heavy curtain, revealing a large room lighted by windows that looked into a courtyard. The light was modified by venetians that let in the air and excluded the sun. He conducted the visitor to a sofa and a group of chairs set round a Persian carpet. The room contained no other furniture.

"Sit down, Miss Norton. I will bring my wife to you. You will find her a little shy, too shy to talk much."

He crossed the room and passed behind another purdah, returning almost immediately with a tall, dignified Muhammadan lady of middle age.

She wore a full skirt and bodice of soft material. Silk stockings and satin slippers without heels covered her feet. Over her shoulders was a large white gauze veil. Its golden edge had rested on her head, but she had tossed it aside, revealing smooth dark hair into which were woven strings of pearls. The drapery was caught at the neck and waist with handsome diamond brooches.

Miss Norton rose to greet her and they shook hands. Adam-u-din seated them side by side on the sofa, where presently his wife drew up her feet beneath her.

The Muhammadan lady smiled like a pleased child interested in some show. As soon as Miss Norton spoke in the language of the harem, her eyes lighted up with an awakened intelligence. The conversation was trivial and wide of the point for which the Englishwoman had come. Miss Norton asked if she might see the family. The other looked at her husband, who clapped his hands. In response a girl entered

timidly. The Sahib held out his hand to give her confidence.

"This child's name is Noora Bee," he said in English. "She is ten years old." He spoke to her in her own language. "Come here, my little flower of the garden. Don't be afraid of the lady."

Thus encouraged, Noora Bee, a tall girl without any pretension to beauty, came forward. She was far too frightened to touch the hand of the mission lady. This was the first European she had seen and the child was unable to take her eyes off the strange sight. She moved in the direction of her mother and sought refuge in the ample folds of her veil. From this refuge she solemnly peeped at the visitor.

"She is nervous," said the Palace Agent, as if in excuse for her behaviour. He turned to Noora Bee. "Come, little star of the harem. Come and give your hand to the lady, English fashion. She is a good, kind lady who will love you."

But Noora Bee was not to be persuaded. She turned her face away and almost hid herself in her own veil. Her mother clasped her closer to her side and whispered comforting words in her ear.

"Don't tease her, Sahib," said Miss Norton in English.

"Now for my pet! The gem of the family!" he said, rising to his feet and clapping his hands again.

(2)

The purdah hanging before the distant door was shaken by an impatient little hand. The fold was grasped by stronger fingers higher up and held aside.

Through the opening burst a happy child of about five years old. She ran forward as fast as her plump legs would carry her. Straight as a die she came towards the Palace Agent, who stood with extended arms ready to receive her. He clasped her to him with a murmur of pet names, to which the child responded with inarticulate chirpings of delight.

Her arms went as far round his neck as they would reach, and she laid her cheek against his, placing kisses at random on his smooth face.

"Is that your youngest?" asked Miss Norton.

"She is not my daughter—I wish she were!—she is Fatima, my niece, the child of my brother who was lost in a typhoon off Japan. I think I mentioned him to Mr. Murray. He

had been commissioned by the firm while Mr. Murray was in England to choose a consignment of fancy goods in Japan, articles that he thought would be attractive. I took his youngest child and her mother into my family. His eldest son occupies his father's house and has his own family."

"I understand," replied Miss Norton, who was not ignorant of the community life among relatives of the Moslems.

She approached the child who was still clasped in her uncle's embrace. There was no shyness. But the arms of the child tightened round the Sahib's neck.

"Show the lady your bangles, my flower."

A wrist was thrust forward on which were three gold bangles, each set with a diamond. Gaining courage, Fatima exhibited the other wrist, on which were three more bangles.

Miss Norton admired them, and the child was encouraged to show more treasures. She pulled at a necklace of pearls that was half-hidden in the folds of the jacket she wore.

"Lovely! Beautiful!" cried the visitor.

Fatima's black hair, smooth and shining with scented oil, hung in two plaits into which were woven strings of pearls. One of these Fatima pulled forward. She pointed to the pearls and smiled with pleasure at the admiration they called forth.

Fatima looked at Noora Bee with a curious expression of triumph.

"The big sister hasn't got pearls like mine," she said.

Miss Norton glanced at Noora Bee, who was still sheltering herself by her mother's side. The older girl was scowling with jealousy.

"But I see bangles on her arm. One, two, three, four, five, six, just as many as you have."

"They haven't got diamonds on them like mine."

"They will have when your sister is bigger," said Miss Norton, who was familiar with the passions roused by the demon jealousy in the harem. It is the root of most of the trouble among women of Indian families who are gosha. Suddenly Noora Bee found courage to use her tongue, and she broke into angry speech.

"I shall have more diamonds and pearls than you will have when I am married. My father is alive. Yours is dead," she said, turning to her mother for confirmation of her assertion.

"Yes, joy of my heart! Of course you will," responded the elder woman, glancing at her husband with a confident smile.

The Palace Agent placed Fatima on her feet in front of Miss Norton.

"Let the lady see your new jacket," he said.

The child turned and twisted to show off her costume. It consisted of satin pyjamas, and the jacket. The elder girl was dressed like her mother with a skirt and bodice and a small gauze veil which she could draw shawl-fashion over her hair. The feet of both girls were left bare. Over the instep rested silver bangles. They were similar in both cases and were not jewelled. The only difference in these ornaments was a row of tiny silver bells on the bangles of the younger child that looked like beads. They tinkled as Fatima moved restlessly in front of Miss Norton.

The missionary lady exclaimed in admiration at the silvery tinkle. Fatima stamped a foot to make them sound more clearly. The visitor lifted her hands in pretended astonishment.

While these trivialities were taking place Miss Norton, mindful of the object of her visit, used her eyes. The Palace Agent, equally observant, was aware that the English woman was doing her best to identify the child with the lost Faith.

Not a single detail in appearance tallied with the description she had received from Murray. Only in one item was there a similarity. Fatima must have been of the same age as Faith. That was all.

"Did this child's mother belong to a Hyderabad family?" she asked.

"No, she was a Persian, a distant relative of the Shah of Persia."

While he spoke the Sahib busied himself with the jewelled buttons of Fatima's coat. He slipped it off and displayed pale pink underwear of silk, such as is worn by Western people.

"I get these garments from the Stores. All the members of my family love them."

Fatima thought it great fun getting rid of her clothes. Before long she was naked. Miss Norton made no protest. She comprehended the reason for the action. The Sahib was determined that nothing should be hidden.

"Mustn't catch cold," said his wife, as she freed herself from her daughter's clutch and hastily reclothed her little niece.

She exercised the same loving care shown by her husband.

She was attached to the child, but her love had none of the passionate devotion which was so strong in Adam-u-din.

Fatima, reclothed, was standing at Miss Norton's knee, putting her ear to the wrist-watch that the visitor wore. Suddenly piercing screams fell on their ears. The big girl again clutched at her mother's draperies as though to seek shelter. Fatima bounded back to her uncle and was caught in his arms.

"Don't be frightened, my pearl. It is only the mother calling for her daughter."

The screams ceased as abruptly as they had begun. They were not the cries of a sane person. Miss Norton glanced at her host. He understood the question in her eyes.

"Poor thing!" he said. "It is my brother's wife. She is not herself. The loss of her husband, to whom she was devoted, has turned her brain. The doctor tells me that she may recover if we keep her quiet. Meanwhile, she terrifies both the children when she screams like that."

"She is not in pain?"

"It is purely mental. She has probably asked for her daughter, and they have told her that she is with me."

He rose from his seat, holding Fatima in his arms. She was still clinging to him, her cheek lying against his, asking him to hold her tight. While she spoke her lips pressed coaxing kisses on his face.

"Now, Miss Norton, you must see the rest of my family," he said. "I will take you through all the rooms."

He moved towards the further door by which his wife and the children had come.

"You are to make a thorough search that will satisfy Mr. Murray and the lawyers in England. No door is closed against you. Please go wherever you like."

The curtained doorway led into a succession of smaller rooms. All were furnished in much the same way. Rugs and mats, cushions and pillows of all kinds and sizes were strewn over the floors without order or method. In nearly every room were brass and silver cups and trays. Here and there was a charcoal brazier on which could be warmed milk or toast. A strong smell of onion and garlick pervaded the air where the brazier stood.

Everywhere they came upon women, well dressed and of gentle manners, not one without a shy smile of welcome. At a sign from the big master certain young women came forward

each with a child in her arms. They were introduced as his sons' wives. They proudly displayed their older children, pushing them forward to be seen and of course admired by the strange lady.

The visit was a great event in their lives, something to be talked about for days afterwards.

The Palace Agent arrived at the last door, the door that opened on to the outer world, forbidden to the inmates.

"Are you satisfied, Miss Norton?" asked the Sahib, not altogether without a note of anxiety in his query.

It sounded as if he were prepared to retrace his steps if she desired it and allow her to inspect still further. She was convinced, however, that she had seen all that was there, and that the harem held no secrets.

"I am quite satisfied that among your large family you have no little maid who answers to the description of the lost Faith.

She fancied that he drew a sigh of relief.

"I have allowed you to see what has never before been shown to anyone belonging to the outer world. It is something that will never be exhibited again."

She began to express her thanks. He checked her by a gesture.

"Please let me speak. In all honesty I must tell you that I have acted thus for my own benefit. I could not bear to have the existence of any doubt on the subject of Faith's disappearance. It is not a pleasant thing to be suspected of kidnapping any child."

"You have been extremely kind and forbearing," replied Miss Norton. "I shall be able to convince Mr. Murray that the lost child is not with you."

They had moved through the last door and it was closed. A messenger was sent to summon the carriage which was to take Miss Norton back to Murray's house. While they waited she asked the Palace Agent a question, speaking once more in English.

"Would you mind, Sahib, giving me your opinion as to what became of the child, Faith Belton?"

He answered slowly and thoughtfully.

"I believe that the old ayah took possession of her, after returning from handing over Joan and Phillis to the matron of the Civil Orphan Asylum. She intended to have her educated in some mission school, paying a small fee in accordance

with what she could afford, out of her wages. She hoped to marry her to some Eurasian who could afford to keep his mother-in-law for the rest of her life. It was not Allah's will that this should be. The child was in bad health when with us, and was quite unfit for the rough life she would have had with the woman. She probably died in Bangalore soon after her arrival and was buried as Mariama's granddaughter."

"I think that you have given the nearest solution to the mystery that can be arrived at," said Miss Norton, as she and the Palace Agent parted.

There was the ghost of a smile on his lips when he returned to the privacy of his house.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

MURRAY was impatient for news. He had returned to the bungalow for lunch on purpose to hear about Miss Norton's visit. The sound of the horse's hoofs, as the Sahib's carriage drew up under the portico, brought him from his sitting-room.

"Well? What luck?" he asked.

"None, except that I have been most handsomely treated."

"I felt that I was safe in letting you go; that the Sahib would be, as he always is, the thorough gentleman."

They went into the house, and before long she was seated at the lunch-table with her host and hostess.

"In all my visits to Moslem families I have never been allowed to penetrate so freely into the interior of the harem. No door was closed against me. It was the Palace Agent himself who invited me to go wherever I chose. I might have pulled aside any purdah to peep behind. I was much struck by the happiness I saw written on every face, with the exception of the poor widow of the Sahib's brother. Grief for the loss of her husband has sent her off her head. The rest, from the Sahib's wife down to the lowest servants, were all pleased to see me and met me with welcoming smiles that did my heart good. I wish I could be sure of the same reception and see the same happiness everywhere."

"That was satisfactory," observed Mrs. Murray.

"What discoveries did you make?" asked Murray, full of curiosity.

"None to serve our purpose. I was first introduced to his wife, a tall, gentle, dignified woman who knew no English. I was able, however, to speak in the language of the harem. But the Sahib being present, the conversation was carried on with him. Her youngest daughter, a girl of ten, was with her. She was shy and awkward. The Sahib has two daughters-in-law and an old aunt living permanently with him. All three had their families with them. The young ones varied in complexion, but not one of them looked as if she had any European blood in her veins."

"The Muhammadans of good birth are most particular in

their choice of wives for the sons of the family," said Murray. "The girls must not only be well born but they must be of the Moslem religion. Even if a man takes a woman as a concubine, he marries her by one form or another before living with her. The marriage ceremony may be intended to last only for a short period until, in fact, it is known whether the woman will bear him a child. Then he may put her away if he is tired of her. But you probably know all this."

"We ought to be familiar with all their domestic customs if we hope to do any good," replied Miss Norton. "There was one charming little person whose name was Fatima. I lost my heart to her."

"One of the Sahib's children?"

"She was his niece, the daughter of his brother who was lost on his way to Japan. The child has found a second father in the Sahib. The two are devoted to each other."

"What age was she?"

"I couldn't say. Fatima might have been the same age as the lost child. Anyway, she wasn't Faith. She was as brown as a berry, and her hair was jet black."

"Her eyes?" asked Mrs. Murray.

"Difficult to see in the dim, curtained light of the room. I think they were hazel-grey."

"They ought to have been brown or black like her hair."

"They told me that her mother was a Persian," said Miss Norton.

"Persians sometimes have the grey eyes of the northern nations, with the black hair and brown complexions of the south," said Murray. "We have a clerk in our office, an interpreter in the correspondence bureau. He is light brown and has black hair and eyebrows, but his eyes are a cool grey."

"Fatima was the most lovable little pet I ever saw in a harem. She was free from all shyness. Noora Bee, the ten-year-old daughter, was desperately jealous of her father's preference for this little Houri of a child. In consequence she was sulky and did not show to advantage."

"Your evidence clears the Palace Agent of the imputation under which he has somehow fallen of having bought Faith from the old ayah."

"Her colouring was in every respect Oriental," said Miss Norton. "The Sahib managed to remove all her clothing. Mrs. Adam-u-din dressed her again quickly, saying that she

would catch cold, but her husband had so managed that I could thoroughly examine the child."

"I shall have to ask you to write a letter to me, stating what you have done. I think with regard to Adam-u-din Sahib it should be conclusive," said Murray.

"Is any other family suspected of having bought the child?" asked Miss Norton.

"Not one," answered Murray confidently. "There was no communication with any other family that we are aware of. The Palace Agent was friendly with Belton. He was the kind of well-bred Indian it was possible to invite into one's house and treat as a friend apart from business relations. Mrs. Belton knew him and liked him. I think he won her heart by the interest he took in Joan."

Miss Norton returned to Bellary, and Murray sent a full account to the lawyer of the inquiry she had made.

A search at Bangalore among the registers of burials in the missions resulted only in the record of the interment of Mariama, an ayah formerly in the employment of Mr. Godfrey Belton, of Hyderabad. There was no mention of a child who could be identified as her step-granddaughter, Faith Belton.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

(I)

AFTER fruitless efforts to trace the lost child, the quest was abandoned. Every field of inquiry was exhausted, and the searchers recognized the fact that they had drawn a blank.

When the War broke out, the lawyers decided to discontinue their efforts and close the business.

In the meantime the education of the two girls at home was not neglected. Joan, as has been related, was sent to a large school at Southwold, about fifty miles distant. She was very happy there, and before she came back for good Phillis joined her.

Joan left school at the age of eighteen and returned to her uncles and aunt at the Hall.

Mr. and Mrs. Oakley had handed over the boarding-house, now called a private hotel, to other hands. Oakley still carried on the house agency at Beltonville, going to his office every day.

Richard and Clement, disinclined for marriage, continued to live at the Hall, pursuing their daily occupations on the estate as in their father's lifetime.

Olive kept house for them in the old home. It was a happy family party to which Joan returned. She settled down contentedly. Her aunt found plenty for her to do, and she was never at a loss for occupation.

Very little change had taken place during the last half-century in life on the land in East Anglia. The women of the family carried on the old tradition, "Boy to the plough, girl to the cow"; but it was not quite the same as in the old days. Machinery had appeared in the milking-shed as well as on the land. It took old Betsy some time to reconcile herself to fixing on a contrivance that did away with the necessity of drawing the milk by hand.

The dairy was supplied by a large herd of pedigree cattle. The Hall had always been the home of red-polled hornless beasts. The cows were good milkers, but the bulls were short in temper. As Betsy put it: "They were apt to get above

themselves with no work and no exercise." Their curly heads were too readily lowered against the intruder when he arrived to drive the cows to the "nettus" (neat-house), as it was called. When the lord of the herd became too saucy and was out of control he was sent to a shed where he grew into Christmas beef.

Joan learnt to make butter and cheese. She also took charge of the poultry, reared on the intensive system. Flocks of turkeys, geese, fowls and ducks were turned out on to the fields where the grain had been harvested and were prepared for the big markets at Yarmouth and Lowestoft.

A large vegetable garden as well as the flower-beds claimed the attention of aunt and niece. Old Ben had built tomato and mushroom houses on a big scale and had planted orchards which were highly cultivated. He had a reputation for the renowned apples known as Norfolk biffans (or beefands, as Parson Woodforde spelt the word). The Belton orchards found it difficult to meet the demand for their produce.

Motor-cars were coming into general use. Joan bought herself a useful run-about and carried some of the produce to the retailers in Beltonville and Yarmouth.

Into the midst of this peaceful life of congenial occupation burst the news of the War. At first it had little effect on their various lives. Every member of the family was too busy to give it a thought. But certain incidents gradually forced the dreadful reality of its existence upon them.

The two middle-aged "Yeoman farmers," as they were called by the few remaining county families, began to have conscious-stricken moments on the score of not "doing their bit." Many of the labourers employed by the Beltons, the best and strongest, went to the colours.

One sturdy old fellow named Sturmer, who could still draw a furrow and pitch a sheaf of corn against most, presented himself at the recruiting office. He declared that he was two years under age and asked for the shilling as he called it.

They laughed and turned him down good-naturedly. He grinned broadly, showing more red gums than white ivories.

"You're too old, my man. You couldn't keep up with the young ones."

"That I could, bor and bate 'em, too," he replied indignantly.

The recruiting sergeant read honest disappointment on the Saxon face and added:

"I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll take your name and address, and if we run short of men and want you we'll telegraph for you."

"I'll come, dal me if I won't! I can carry a rifle as well as I can carry a scuppet" (spade).

"Is your wife alive?"

"Noo; I'm living with my grandson. He'll be rare surprised to hear that I'm to be telegraphed for. Why, bor, they couldn't do more if it was Mr. Richard himself!"

He was not telegraphed for. The fact confirmed him in the belief that we were giving "them there Jarmans" the good hiding they deserved.

Suddenly Clement Belton sprang it upon the family that he had enlisted. Dick could carry on alone, he declared. With Olive's supervision and Joan's help in the dairy, that department would not suffer in his absence. The pedigree herd could be bred as usual. Dick could dispose of any that were ready for sale on Norwich Hill (market). Butter, eggs, milk, and cheese were still in local demand, also fruit and vegetables.

Life at the Hall ran on the old lines smoothly enough after Clem's departure, until Joan caught the fever of wanting to "do her bit." She could not forget what was happening on the other side of the grey North Sea. If by chance she forgot, a cold day with a misty south-east wind brought a dull boom to her ears. It was a sound to be felt as much as heard, the sound of guns dealing death and destruction on the other side of the water. As she stood on the low cliffs the firing of the guns seemed to come up through the ground beneath her feet.

Some friends, the daughters of neighbouring clergy, quietly left their old rectory homes and put on uniforms bearing the red cross. They discussed hospital work and talked of the need of voluntary helpers in the canteens on the front.

Joan went to see them off at Yarmouth in the London express. Each time that she watched a receding train the urge became greater. She must be one of them and not be left standing disconsolately on the platform.

The sound of the guns had been more than usually insistent. In response, some of the windows of the old house jarred and rattled with the vibration. Joan walked into the morning-room, where Aunt Olive sat, and startled the placid lady with the announcement that she was joining the Red Cross band of women at the Front.

"Oh, my dear!" cried Mrs. Oakley, gulping down her dismay.

Joan, with her modesty, was not fully aware of her own worth to the older woman as a helper and cheerful companion in these anxious days. Her aunt checked herself in the lamentations that sprang to her lips. She reminded herself that it was not for her to put anything in the way of youthful patriotism. To encourage was the only method by which she could help the cause. She was too old to leave home and rough it on the edge of the battlefield.

When Joan had finished her pleading for consent, Aunt Olive was quietly acquiescing and promising what assistance she could give in her small way.

"Are you the right age, dear?" asked Mrs. Oakley, studying the fair face now in its first beauty of youth.

"I'm twenty. I shall call myself twenty-one if I am asked. I wish Phil was older. She could help you and take my place."

"She must continue her education for the present. I can carry on all right," said Mrs. Oakley bravely.

"What about my car and delivering some of the produce? You can't do that and be out in all weathers as I am."

"Dick has been talking of getting a light lorry. He will have old Sturmer taught to drive and let him do the delivery business."

"An excellent plan! It will relieve my mind to know that someone is doing my work properly. What about my own car?"

"Your Uncle Harry might like to take it. He wants something quicker than the horse and dogcart to get to the office and round the buildings. Lots of the houses your grandfather put up need repair and in some cases rebuilding and bringing up to date in their fittings."

"I'll lend Uncle Harry the car and shall be grateful if he will look after it for me."

(2)

There was one person who missed her more than a little. This was Hassan. He was two years younger than Joan, but he had formed a great friendship with the good-natured English girl. She had mothered him in the holidays which

he had usually spent under Mrs. Oakley's wing, first at the boarding-house and afterwards at the Hall.

The freedom of the country life, both indoors and out, was ideal for the Indian boy. He spent the fine summer days on the sands or in a house-boat on the broads, where he learnt to swim, to fish, and row. Mrs. Oakley found that he was no trouble. Gentle and good-natured, he fitted into the family circle as if he belonged to it. He had his little room near the nursery, or playroom as it was afterwards termed, and he looked upon it as his home. When they moved into the Hall where there was plenty of space he felt even more at home.

In the ordinary course of events the boy was to return to his father when he was eighteen or nineteen. Adam-u-din Sahib hoped to place him on the staff of the Hyderabad branch of the Stores. As interpreter he would be useful in the correspondence bureau. The experience would be of service when he succeeded his father as Palace Agent.

When the War broke out the Sahib's plans were changed. He concluded that it would be best to delay Hassan's return until the political world was more settled and the route to the East less dangerous. There was no special reason why Hassan should be recalled. On the contrary, it seemed in every way better that he should remain in England a few years longer. The time might be well spent in working for some merchant firm, where he could gain experience of the import and export trade.

The Sahib was prepared to continue the liberal allowance which enabled Hassan to keep his car and to live in comfort near his work.

Hassan was eighteen when Joan determined to become a war worker.

"Has your aunt given you leave to go to the Front?" he asked.

"I haven't asked for leave," she replied.

"Will she have to go with you?" he asked.

She laughed at the suggestion.

"Oh, Hassan! haven't you learnt by this time that we English women go where we wish and do what we like?"

"You mean that there are no restrictions?"

"Do you see any?"

"No, I can't say that I do, but I thought that perhaps you might not really be as free as you appear to be. In

the harem our women seem to be free enough to do what they please, but they have to keep the rules. It is always understood that they are not overstepping the mark. My mother sees to it, and no one dreams of opposing her authority."

"They couldn't go to the Front, you mean, and serve in the hospitals?"

"Certainly not."

"What exactly will your work be?" he asked, full of curiosity.

"Washing and dressing wounds, keeping the Tommies clean, giving them their food and medicine, and housemaiding the wards."

Hassan remained silent. He was thinking of the domestic routine of the harem. Excepting for dressing wounds it seemed very like the daily work of his mother's women, very intimate and boring. He remembered being washed and dressed, and generally mothered as a child, and how latterly he resented the treatment. When he returned to India he would not go back to it. He would join the men, take his meals with them, and, until he had a wife, sleep where they slept. After the marriage he would be assigned a suite of rooms.

He wondered idly if unmarried girls of the harem would ever be permitted to escape from its walls and dictate to their elders the course of action they intended to adopt. The thought made him smile.

"What are you laughing at?" asked Joan suddenly.

"I was trying to imagine the commotion it would cause if you lived in a harem and took your own way as you are doing now."

"I wonder myself that your gosha ladies haven't long since kicked over the traces. I suppose the men are too strong for them. The husbands are old die-hards."

"It isn't the men," protested Hassan. "You have such queer notions about our domestic life."

"For the matter of that, so have you about ours!" she retorted. "You have been in this country—how many years?"

"Ten, and I'm likely to be here some time longer."

"And yet after all the experience you've had at close quarters you ask if I'm going to be saddled with a chaperone!"

Joan laughed at the thought of dragging a woman of over

fifty like her aunt to the battle fields to act propriety while she, Joan, washed and dressed and ministered to the wants of grown men from the ranks.

"I suppose the time will come in the far future when your menkind will unbar the prison doors."

"Now it is you who are floundering in ignorance," cried Hassan. "It isn't the men who bar the door, it's the women. They demand the purdah and the veil. The bolt is on their own side of the door, to keep people out of their sanctuary, not to imprison themselves."

"How idiotic it sounds. What are they afraid of?"

This was a question Hassan did not feel inclined to answer. How could he explain that the men of his country were not to be trusted? They could not control their passions where women were concerned.

"Come for a drive, Hassan," said Joan, who had no inclination to discuss the ethics of the East. "We'll go to Lowestoft, where I have to deliver thirty pounds of tomatoes. You can help me pack them into the car. We will run on further south and lunch somewhere on the road. We shan't be back till sunset."

"Mrs. Oakley won't mind?"

"Really, Hassan, you are the limit, you early Victorian dear!"

"Let me drive you in my car. We shall cover the ground at a better pace than with your old Noah's ark."

"All right, if you will take my tomatoes as well as me."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

(I)

THE War came to an end. It was more than two years since Joan left for the Front. She returned to the Hall with mixed feelings. Aunt Olive, a little older but as active as ever, met her at the door. Joan stepped down from her own car. Oakley had kept it in good running order, although he now possessed one of his own. He had thought to please his niece by sending it to the station for her.

Tears on both sides were inevitable as aunt and niece met. Clement had given his life for his country. His bones lay in Flanders. Richard, who missed his brother every day of his life, kept his grief to himself, but Olive at sight of Joan, was unable to follow her brother's example.

When she had dried her eyes and looked at the girl who had so gallantly stuck to her job, she could see that the scenes of death and suffering had left their mark. Gone for ever was the tender youth of face and feature. The eyes had gained the expression of endurance that may be detected in the sympathetic woman who has been forced to witness pain and agony which it is out of her power to relieve.

"My darling Joan! I'm so glad, so thankful, to get you back safely!"

Joan clung to her as though she needed touch as well as sight to help her to realize the home-coming. Would it be a dream? Would she awake to the moans of the wounded and dying? Would she start up presently to a bitter reality and be sent to fetch those dreadful dressings and basins, which she must presently carry away with their crimson stains? And the smell of the disinfectants, inseparable from the hospitals, would it ever leave her nostrils?

A hand caught hers. She detached herself from Aunt Olive and found Phillis by her side.

"Phil, darling!"

Once more the tears sprang to Joan's eyes, but Phil's joy at seeing her sister soon dispersed them.

"You've come back for good!" cried Phil. She had

developed, and was tall for her age. "Oh, Joan! I've learnt to drive your car," she continued, with the impetuosity of the school girl. "Uncle Harry has been teaching me. If you want any help in taking the fruit and vegetables round I shall be able to give it."

"You're too young at present to have a driving licence," warned Mrs. Oakley.

"I mean when I leave school."

"Oh, yes, certainly, you must lend a hand then, as your Girl Guides put it," replied her aunt.

"And how is everything on the farm?" asked Joan.

"Just as usual, thank God. We had our excursions and alarms when the Zeppelins came."

"We were not let off, I can assure you, on the Front either," said Joan.

"The greatest fright we had here was an enemy raid on Yarmouth."

While they talked they drifted into the drawing-room, where afternoon tea was laid out as usual, with a liberal supply of sandwiches and cakes of all sorts.

"Oh, how delightful!" cried Joan, as she slipped into her old seat with Phil by her side. "A good, solid old afternoon tea," she added, as she helped herself.

Uncle Dick came in at the call of the tea-bell. No one took the empty seat where Clem had once sat. The memory of his square-set figure, faintly scented with the hayrick that he had seen cut and weighed, was with them all, even down to the school-girl niece.

A bright, coal fire burnt in the old-fashioned grate. The lamps were lighted, and after the two uncles, Dick and Harry, had withdrawn to conclude their daily tasks, Oakley to finish his correspondence and send off the letters to the post, Dick to see that the numerous beasts had been fed, Olive and Joan drew nearer to the fire. Phil slipped away. Her sister's eyes followed her.

"She has gone to the dairy to see old Betsy," said Mrs. Oakley.

"Is it her holiday time?"

"No, the holidays are just the same as when you were at school. I begged for a few days off so that she might be here to welcome you home. She goes back to Southwold to-morrow. She is anxious not to miss the exams. at the end of term."

"She was here of course for the summer holidays?"

"She made her headquarters here, but most of the time they spent on the Broads. Dick has given her a beautiful house-boat. The boat is captained by a man and boy, old Sturmer and one of his grandsons."

"I thought he was driving our lorry and distributing the farm produce."

"He was, up to last March when he was laid up with bronchitis. I was afraid we were going to lose the old man. His eldest grandson had been his back-board boy. He was old enough to take on the job, and he gets round in half the time. The old man hadn't the nerve or the eye for up-to-date driving. The care of the house-boat suits him far better, and I feel that Phil is safe with him."

"You said 'they' spent the time on the broads. Who were 'they'?"

"Phil's holiday party. Hassan of course. He never misses an opportunity of coming whenever he can get away, Maisie Moore the rector's daughter, she and Phil are inseparables and go to the same school. Then there was Jim Armstrong, a friend in Hassan's office, such a nice fellow. He's devoted to Phil but I don't know whether anything will come of it. They are all too young to think of love-making I am glad to say. Then there is Archie Hayward and his sister Mabel. They had glorious weather and enjoyed themselves amazingly. Hassan and Phil were considered host and hostess, as the party had supplies from the Hall and the boat belonged to Phil."

Joan made no remark beyond the comment: "Lucky Phil!"

Her thoughts were elsewhere as Olive could see for herself. The girl had something on her mind. It would come out presently.

"Now, dear, tell me about yourself," said Mrs. Oakley.

"Not much to say except that I am thankful that the madness of hate and evil passions is all over. I was one of the first to escape from the hospital. I had a friend at court, a Major Scott. He managed to get me into the first flight of women as soon as the danger of the U-boats was ended."

"That happened with the Armistice."

"Many of the girls were in no hurry to leave. But Lawrence—Major Scott advised me to clear out as soon as I could."

"Wise man!" remarked Aunt Olive, waiting for more with a conviction that Joan had more to say.

"He was coming home himself——"

"Nice for you to have a friend to look after you."

"Oh, Auntie, dearest! He's more than a friend, much more. I've promised to marry him. Lawrence is a darling. You will love him."

Mrs. Oakley laughed happily, well pleased to hear the wonderful news.

"He won't want the love of an old woman like me. He will be my nephew if you marry him, the first nephew I shall have."

"Uncle Dick will like him. He knows a lot about horses. The regiment is mounted, but he is on the Staff and has been away from his regiment during the War."

"Hussars?" enquired Mrs. Oakley. She knew nothing whatever about the army.

"Lancers, belonging to the Indian army."

"Was the regiment at the Front?"

"No, it is in India. When his leave is up we shall have to join it out there. As soon as the War broke out he managed to get home to England. His father is a general, one of the brass hats who managed to slip off the shelf and pop up into life again in the War Office. He pulled the strings and Lawrence got a billet on the West Front. He has had some marvellous escapes, but he has come through all right. Auntie! he's such a dear!"

"I'm sure if you love him. When do you think you will be getting married?"

"Soon after the New Year, that is to say, if he can get the six months' leave he wants. He's coming down here, if you will have him, for Christmas. If we marry in February we shall have five or six months in England."

(2)

It was a week to Christmas. Joan had settled down as if she had never been absent. She picked up the threads of her home life, helped Betsy the head dairy woman, supervised young Sturmer's deliveries, and above all began to gather together the fascinating equipment of the bride, her trousseau. It meant frequent journeys to town, lunches with Lawrence

Scott, dinners and theatres with General and Mrs. Scott, who had welcomed her warmly as a girl after their own heart.

Christmas brought Hassan to the old Hall, full of happy anticipation in the thought of the family party of which he was an old member. His eyes dwelt upon Joan with curiosity. She was changed. Her experience on the Front had developed character and increased a self-confidence which even Mrs. Oakley did not possess.

Major Scott was unable to join the party till Christmas Eve. This gave Hassan an opportunity of renewing his friendship with the English girl who had befriended him from the very beginning, when he was a shy boy of thirteen and she was a protective little self-assured person of fifteen. As she had mothered her pets in India, the decrepit cook-room fowl, the black kid and the scraggy-necked duck, so she had turned in her maternal instincts to the lone Indian boy exiled from his luxurious home.

Though years had passed the two easily fell into companionship and the old friendly relations.

"Come along, Joan. Here's the sun at last. Let's go down to the sea," he said one morning. She was very busy over price lists. Good-natured as ever, she put the pamphlets aside and ran upstairs for her furs. A brisk walk brought them to the familiar beach where the ridges of sand, fringed with small shingle were to be seen in their regular curves, looking as if neither wind nor sea had touched them since she and Phil and Hassan had built sand-castles. They paced along the damp beach where the recent tide had left the sand firm and hard.

"Joan," said Hassan, breaking the silence and coming out of a reverie. "I do so want to ask you a question."

"Ask away, old boy! What's puzzling you?"

"When Mrs. Oakley was arranging for your marriage——"

"What?" she cried, stopping him short. "What are you talking about? Aunt Olive didn't arrange my marriage as you call it."

"Then it was Mr. Oakley or Mr. Belton——?"

"Neither, I arranged it myself."

"But didn't your aunt or one of your uncles speak to Major Scott's father, the General——?"

"Certainly not!" cried Joan, with a touch of indignation at the mere suggestion of anyone interfering in her affairs.

"To whom did Major Scott speak when he had decided to make you his wife?"

"To me, of course, you silly boy! How could he tell, till he asked me, whether I would have him as a husband or not?"

"Could you—would you—have been allowed——?"

"My uncle's and aunt's permission didn't enter the question. When he said: 'Will you marry me?' I said: 'Yes, after we get out of this frightful mess of blood and mud.' We were cold and wet and up to our eyes in mud, scarcely a time to think of marriage."

"You didn't have to write and ask Mrs. Oakley or Mr. Belton before you gave him an answer?"

"It was none of their business. I'm of age and can do as I like. It wasn't their show. Why should they be asked?"

"You knew, of course, that they would approve? Supposing they had been against it?"

"So much the worse for them."

"Would you have consented to marry Major Scott if they had opposed you?"

"Tooth and nail! You bet! He is the best man in the world."

"And you would have told them so?"

"Yes, and rubbed it in well."

"Wouldn't you have been afraid of being locked in your room?"

Joan burst into peals of laughter, laughter that did her good.

"This is a free country, Hassan. Do you lock up your girls if they want to marry the wrong man from your point of view?"

"Our women have no choice in the matter. It is all settled for them by their parents."

"But supposing that they don't like the choice that is made for them?" asked Joan.

"That never happens. You see, they can't choose for themselves, because they never see the men until after the marriage. When every ceremony is at an end the bridegroom is allowed to enter the bride's room and remove her veil. Then they see each other for the first time."

"If the girl is as ugly as sin what happens?"

"He can divorce her."

"And if the man is an old scarecrow, double her age, what can she do?"

"Grin and bear it, I suppose. I don't see what else can be done," said Hassan.

"Poor things! Poor things! You are centuries behind us, Hassan. Honestly, how do you like it? Is that how you will be married when you go back to India?"

"I'm afraid so. It is the custom."

"Kick against it for all you're worth. Say that you mean to choose your wife yourself."

"How can I choose if I can't see them? All the nice women are behind the purdah. They are all gosha, hidden."

"Do you never see a woman?"

"Not one that I could marry. Of course there are plenty of low-class Muhammadans who have to work out of doors. They can't remain gosha all their lives. But they belong to the common people and marry in their class."

"I wonder what your wife will be like?"

"My father says she is beautiful and that I am very fortunate——"

"Goodness! has he chosen her already?"

"I believe so, and I shall be married to her as soon as I get home."

"By the by, when are you going back to India?" asked Joan.

"Father wants me to stop on here in London and see something of the buying department of the Europe Stores. If it can be arranged, I am to go round with the buyer as assistant secretary. I shall like that."

They climbed the cliff and went back to the Hall by way of sandy lanes where they were sheltered from the cold winds.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

(I)

CHRISTMAS came and a happy party assembled at the Hall. The old spirit was there, but it was sobered by the past years' experiences. Phil was the youngest and by far the merriest of them all. Scott found her a delightful child. She was a good horsewoman, which in these days of motor-cars comparatively few girls could claim to be. She went ferreting rabbits with him and initiated him into the mystery of catching pike and eels in the silent rivers and broads.

Hassan and his friend Armstrong appeared in due time. They were to stay over the New Year.

Joan was busy superintending the arrangements for the big dinner given annually to the workers on the estate. Many who had once been guests at this yearly gathering had, like their master, Mr. Clement, answered the call of their country and would never return. Other workers had filled up the gaps in the staff and were looking forward to the reunion that, according to tradition, always took place at the Hall.

With the teamsters, the herdsman, gardeners, dairymaids and labourers came the wives and children. There was room for them all in the big servants' hall.

Mrs. Oakley, less able to stand about than formerly, left much to Joan, whose past experience had qualified her to step into her aunt's shoes.

Joan was standing on a kitchen chair holding a big bunch of holly and mistletoe. She was endeavouring to reach a large hook that had held many similar bunches in past years. The hook was driven into a huge oak beam and from all appearance was likely to serve its purpose for some years to come. Phillis, followed by Hassan and Jim Armstrong, came bursting into the hall.

"Look out! Phil!" cried Joan, wobbling as she stood. "You will have me over if you barge about like that!"

She descended from her perch and Hassan took the bunch from her hand.

"That's right, Hassan, I want a little help."

Another hand gently but firmly pushed him aside and relieved him of his prickly burden.

"Let me do that," said Lawrence in a tone that was not to be gainsaid.

Hassan's smile of pleasure vanished. He made no remonstrance, but gave up his bunch and stepped back.

"What is it that you want, Phil?" asked Joan.

"You've got the whole blessed lot of mistletoe. We want some for the servants' hall as well as the front hall."

"Haven't you got your little lot of holly and mistletoe for the rest of the house?"

"Not a leaf, my dear. You have bagged the lot!"

"I really can't spare any. I have only just enough for the front hall and dining-room."

She was preparing to climb on to her perch again, but she would have preferred to see her sister and helpers safely out of the way before attempting it.

"What are we to do?" asked Phil.

"Take the car and run to Yarmouth. You will find plenty of greenstuff for sale in the market."

"Good! What fun! Come along, Joan!"

"Sorry, but I really can't spare the time. Take Hassan and Jim with you and let one of them drive."

"You come, Lawrence," said Phil. He was already standing on the chair with the "mistletoe bough" in his hand prepared to put it in position. "If you come, Joan will follow."

"I'm staying to help to finish here," he replied. "You be off with your escort, you little madcap!"

Phil turned and made a school-girl grimace at him.

"Oh, bother!" she retorted. "I say, you're not going to be two duds on our hands, are you? You will have plenty of time to get on with the mistletoe business when the lights are out."

"All right! You will not be let off, miss," responded Lawrence.

"Be off at once, there's a good girl," admonished Joan.

"There's heaps to do still. If you go at once, we shall be able to get the front rooms decorated before it is dark."

Phil was still making contemptuous gestures at her prospective brother-in-law.

"First you will have to catch me," she cried, derisively;

"and that will take some doing for an old war-worn horse like you!"

"Oh! get away, do!" said Joan, who was losing patience.

"Come along, Hassan," said Phil, her eyes sparkling with the excitement of the season. "Don't let's waste time over those two village idiots. We will run over to Yarmouth and get what we want. Come along, Jim!"

Jim was laughing. He thoroughly understood the situation. He had seen his own sisters break away from the family circle and pair off with their chosen ones. He followed as he was bidden, allowing Hassan to go ahead with the impetuous Phil. She slipped her arm through that of the Indian.

"I'm awfully sorry for you, old dear!" she said. "You've lost her. Your old chum has been stolen from you, from us all. It's the usual thing, but lovers are the very deuce and all!"

"I know that it can't be helped——"

"Of course it can't. You will have to take me on instead. I shan't make a bad pal," and she gave his arm a little squeeze of sympathy.

They returned in time for lunch. Joan had given up her attempt to put up the traditional mistletoe bough. Afterwards Phil, Jim and Hassan devoted all their energies to dealing with the prickly holly and putting up the Druidical bough in its familiar place in the front hall. There was a hot argument over the height at which it was to swing.

"It must be high enough not to scratch Major Scott's head when he gets busy," remarked Jim, glancing at Phil. He had heard her challenge.

"Let's measure him. Where is he?" suggested Hassan.

"In the conservatory with Joan, probably," said Phil.

"They are after flowers for the table, chrysanthemums and anything else they can find," said Jim.

"Flowers!" cried Phil, scornfully. "No use chasing idiots. Here, Jim, you're the tallest of us three. Let's take your measure. If the holly scratches Lawrence, it will serve him right."

"He is taller than I am," remarked Jim.

"Never mind," responded Phil. "I want him to be scratched after what he said."

"You don't want to be kissed," said Jim, wondering if she would prove very venomous if he tried his hand at it. He

was the same age as Hassan, and was not troubled with shyness.

"Not by you, Mr. Wrong," cried Phil.

"You would prefer the Major?"

"If anything, he would be a shade worse than you," she responded.

(2)

On Christmas Day they dined at the same time that their humble guests were busy in the servants' hall. When dinner was over, the young people rose to their feet and the punch was made. Uncle Dick solemnly bore the huge steaming bowl to the servants' hall, the rest of the company following.

The time-honoured ceremony was carried out in all its formality. Tumblers were provided for the men, wineglasses for the women. They were filled by Joan, who ladled out the precious drink with the soup ladle.

Richard Belton took up his position where once his father had stood and solemnly gave them a Christmas welcome and New Year's greeting.

Old Sturmer, as the oldest employee on the farm, rose to his feet in reply. He declared, as was his custom Christmas after Christmas, that this was a rare old masterpiece, this was! He wished to say in the name of everybody present that this "fare to be the biggest masterpiece of all" with Miss Joan back, God bless her! He understood that she was going to furrin parts after she was married. This here Christmas would be the last that she would spend with them. He hoped that her Christmasses would be happy wherever she was.

He looked down the length of the long trestle tables which still bore the broken remains of large, rich plum-puddings, to be finished presently, and rapped the table with the handle of his knife.

"All you, together, join me in wishing our master, Mr. Richard, and our missus, Mrs. Oakley, and her husband and the young ladies long life and happiness. Three cheers for the family!"

Hassan, standing a little apart, looked on in silence at the strange domestic ceremony. He could not see his father in Richard's place, with his whole household gathered round him. And yet there was no reason why some such assembly round the head of the family should not take place. It was

not of a religious nature. It was purely social whatever its origin, and it concerned the women quite as much as the men.

Major Scott had been in India. He knew something of the Moslems. Most of the men of his regiment were followers of the Prophet, and were rigid observers of the teaching of the Koran, the Muhammadan scriptures.

Lawrence edged his way towards Hassan. Joan was busy refilling the glasses. The bowl, like the teapot, had received the addition of some hot water, heat having to make up for alcoholic strength.

"You're a follower of the Prophet, Hassan, I believe," said Lawrence quietly.

"Yes, sir," the young man replied.

"Well, what do you think of this strange ceremony?"

"It is good for the family life."

"What about the spirits used, the rum and sherry that go to make the punch?" asked Lawrence.

"They are not forbidden to the Europeans as they are with us. We have the pipe instead, a better and quieter soother than alcohol."

Joan had finished her task by emptying the bowl to its last drop. Her uncle made a move to leave the room. The ceremony had stirred his memory of other days when the family circle was intact. He was anxious to get into the privacy of his own sitting-room where he would have time for thought. He looked round at his guests. "Good-bye, together!" he said, dropping into the vernacular speech of his men. "I hope I shall be here next Christmas to greet you all again."

"Good-bye, sir! Good-bye!" they cried, with one voice springing to their feet once more. Although they were not leaving yet awhile, they knew that this was the master's farewell.

"Sit ye down and fill your pipes. There's still plenty of home-brewed to fall back upon," said the master.

He walked slowly from the great hall, past the entrance to the spacious dairy, along the flagged corridor and through the green-baize door that shut off the front part of the house from the servant's quarters.

"Our duty to the guests done, now we begin our own fun. Aunt Olive!" cried Lawrence. It was the first time he had hailed her by the familiar term. "Allow me the honour!"

He took her by the hand and led her ceremoniously to the

mistletoe bough and kissed her on the cheek. There was a laugh all round as she took out a filmy bit of cambric and passed it over the spot he had touched. Then he turned to Joan.

"Your turn next!" he cried.

But Phil was before him. Taking Uncle Dick off his guard as he was trying to slip away, she dragged him under it and gave him a bear's hug with a smack of a kiss on his clean-shaven cheek. This was enough for Dick. He chuckled and made his escape as swiftly as he could.

Phil's activities extended boisterously to Uncle Harry. After him it was Jim Armstrong, who needed no persuasion. He met her half-way and got in as many kisses as he had time for. The tables were turned when she fell upon her future brother-in-law, who ran away in pretended alarm. When he was caught he received a smack from her hand and not from her lips.

Again the only person to play the part of looker-on was Hassan. Standing well away from the rest, he made no effort to join in the good-natured scrimmage. The game, if game it could be called, was like nothing he had ever seen in his father's house.

Suddenly a pair of strong young arms went round his neck and he was dragged to the mistletoe. He made no resistance. His head was pulled down and he received Phil's bold salute on his cheek. A curious smile curved his lips.

Lawrence saw it with doubtful approval. This was playing with unknown fire. He opened his arms as if he were shooin' along a flock of turkeys, and advanced on the roysterers.

"Enough! Enough!" he cried. "We've played this game long enough. Joan is tired. Let's follow Aunt Olive into the drawing-room and have some quieter games."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

(1)

THE days flew fast for Joan. The wedding was fixed for St. Valentine's Day, the fourteenth of February. The weather promised to be fine.

Lawrence Scott and his best man arrived at the private hotel which had once been Olive's boarding-house. By this time under more ambitious management, it had grown out of all knowledge. Now it had a bar and billiards-room, a large garage, and was never empty of guests, although it had its full season when the healthy bracing air of Beltonville was not too sharp.

General and Mrs. Scott accompanied their son. Freda, Lawrence's only sister, was a guest at the Hall. She was a lively young woman of an independent disposition that attracted Phillis at once. These two, with four old friends, neighbours who had grown up with Joan, formed the band of bridesmaids.

Immediately after arrival at the hotel Lawrence slipped away to see his bride. She had much to show him. Presents had been arriving from all sorts of people. They had to be set out and displayed.

Joan seized upon her lover as soon as he appeared.

"I've such a lot to show you, darling. We're putting most of the things in the drawing-room. I have a few that I am keeping upstairs for the present, mostly jewellery."

She led him to the room, called the play-room. Phil kept her treasures there, her skates, the oars belonging to the dinghy of her house-boat, her collection of birds' eggs and butterflies and many other properties of no value to anyone but herself.

Joan closed the door and there was an interval in which the wedding presents were forgotten.

"Now you must see and admire my treasures."

She unlocked a tin dispatch-box and drew from it a little velvet-lined case smelling strongly of sandalwood, of which it was made. It contained a long platinum chain in which

were set a number of single stone diamonds which glittered as she lifted it out. Lawrence opened his eyes in astonishment.

"What a lovely chain!" he exclaimed. "Who sends you this? None of my people, I am afraid. They're not rich enough to run to diamonds. Nor am I, darling, much as I love you."

He took it delicately from her fingers and let it rest on the palm of his hand.

"Hassan sent it."

"What? Hassan, the Indian?"

"Yes, he's one of our oldest friends. Mr. Murray introduced him years ago and asked us to be kind to the boy. His father was a friend of my father. We called him the Sahib. He was one of the suppliers of goods to the Nizam's palace. Hassan was only thirteen when we first knew him. He had been in England four years, but had made no friends out of his school circle. He was rather shy, but just as nice as he is now."

Lawrence listened in silence. He was examining the stones closely. Joan continued:

"Hassan's father sent it from India. Isn't it beautiful?"

"Fit for a duchess!"

"With all those diamonds it must be worth a lot of money!"

"A thousand pounds, if not more."

"Oh, Lawrence! Really?" cried Joan, in her surprise.

"They are the very best of their kind."

"What a responsibility they will be. How am I to take care of such a treasure?"

"Wear it. It is meant to be worn constantly, as you can see by the strength of the chain and the solid setting of the stones."

"A valuable ornament like that is not suitable for morning wear," objected Joan.

"You can hide it under your frills. It will be far safer on your neck than anywhere else, as we have a lot of travelling before us. Did Hassan write with it or give it to you in person?"

"He sent it by registered post. I haven't seen him since he was here at Christmas. He is coming with Jim Armstrong this evening."

"May I see the letter, or is it strictly private?"

"Of course not. Here's the letter. It is delightful."

She went to the table and extracted an envelope from a bundle of others, all being congratulations from friends.

"Here it is. Do read it. It is quaint and romantic, quite unlike any of the others."

Lawrence went through it with curiosity. He had never been jealous of Hassan. Joan was not the sort of girl to give him cause for anything of the sort, but naturally he had been a little curious as to the exact footing on which they stood. The letter ran as follows:

Joan, my dear English sister,

Wear these always. They are the crystal tears that have fallen from my eyes at the thought of losing you out of my life. You have been very good to the homeless boy. May Allah bless and keep you.

Your sad but always affectionate brother,

Hassan.

"Have you thanked him?"

"Yes, and I shall do so again when he arrives."

"You are putting him up here?"

"He will have his old room which was given to him when he first came. He calls it his little English home, and it will be his to come to whenever he likes till he goes back to India."

Lawrence was silent for a while. Joan busied herself sorting out the letters she wanted him to see.

"When does Hassan return to India?" he asked. "He is old enough to take up an appointment as assistant in the Hyderabad Branch of the Stores. I think you said that was what he was preparing for."

"Not yet. His father wants him to see something of the buyers' side of the business."

"This will take him away from London," he observed.

"To lots of places on the Continent as well as to the chief manufacturing towns of England."

"Just as well," said Lawrence, to himself. But she heard him.

"Why do you say that, darling?"

"It will give him something to think of."

Joan glanced at him shrewdly.

"You don't like Hassan," she said.

"It isn't a case of like or dislike. I should probably think highly of him as a promising specimen of a modern young

Moslem if I met him in his own country. Here he is a fish out of water, absorbing a lot of Western ideas which won't fit into his life when he gets back."

"The experience he has in England ought to help him."

"On the contrary, it will handicap him when he finds himself in his conservative father's house."

"You wouldn't have had him stand still and learn nothing, would you?" she asked, puzzled by his attitude towards the young man. Lawrence did not reply. The whole subject was a problem, more difficult than Joan knew. Where would these friendly intimacies with English women end? "I think you are mistaken in Hassan," continued Joan. "He has been long enough in this country to have learnt how to fit himself into our life."

Lawrence could not help recalling Phil's behaviour under the mistletoe, when she kissed the young man. She stirred a depth of emotion that would not be possessed by the ordinary young Briton of his age. Joan continued her praise of her friend.

"I can assure you that Hassan is pleasant and companionable in every way. He makes you forget his brown complexion when you have him living in the house like one of the family. He is rich and generous and doesn't sponge——"

"One is not likely to forget that fact after seeing his magnificent gift to you."

"—and he never loses his temper," concluded Joan, determined to stand up for her old friend.

"Granted, but with everything said and done, I shall be very glad to hear that he has been shipped off for good to Hyderabad."

(2)

The wedding passed off happily, as most weddings do in the country, where there is plenty of room for the guests. Uncle Richard gave the bride away. His thoughts dwelt on the two brothers he had lost, both younger than himself. It made him feel old. Aunt Olive resembled the April weather that was coming, a mixture of smiles and tears. Phil was, as usual, full of high spirits. The bridegroom's best man, an officer in the Staff Corps, found her fresh and amusing. He wondered how long that country freshness would last if she

lived among the girls with whom he associated in town. How soon would she be making up her face, and spoiling her youth with powder and paint?

The bride and bridegroom went their way. The guests departed from the old Hall and the routine of the household resumed its quiet course. Phillis returned to school at Southwold not altogether pleased to leave her aunt.

"Auntie, darling!" she cried, as she said farewell to Mrs. Oakley. "If you find that you miss Joan do let me come back and pick up the pieces. I could do all that she ever did and more too."

"I have no doubt of it. I'll send for you if old Betsy gives notice or the kettle boils over."

"I'll come! You bet!"

"But Phil, you must finish your education."

"Cows and fowls don't want a school marm to look after them."

The time slipped by with the monotonous smoothness peculiar to country life far removed from London, and out of touch with the stir and bustle of the great centre of English life.

The surface was pleasantly ruffled when Hassan appeared on the scenes. His visits coincided rather curiously with Phillis's return home.

"How did Hassan know that you were at home?" asked Aunt Olive one day.

"I told him, of course, that I was coming."

"Do you write to him?"

"Whenever I have anything to say. I told him to bring Jim with him. It makes it pleasanter for us all round and we just fill the car."

Aunt Olive was not altogether pleased that the two young people were corresponding. But she did not see how she could stop it; nor could she find a good reason for doing so. After all it seemed harmless.

"What does the headmistress say to your writing letters to a young Indian? Perhaps she doesn't know about it."

"Oh, yes, she does! We have to hand in our letters for the post so that she can see every address."

"Hasn't she asked any questions about Hassan?"

"No. You see I always address him in the old way as we did when he was a schoolboy, as Master Hassan care of the school-master and it is sent on."

"Phil, I don't think that is quite straight on your part. It is a species of deception."

"It's the only way that I can communicate with Hassan and I shall do it till I come home for good. Then I can write direct."

"What does Hassan say in his letters?"

"Nothing more than would go on a post card. Would you like to see the sort of thing we write?"

Phil was off before her aunt could stop her. She returned with a sheaf of letters. Aunt Olive could not help laughing as she looked through some of them. "Right-o. I'll come by the ten o'clock morning express from Liverpool Street. Yours H." "Can't get away this time." "Make it next Friday instead of this. I've got to go over to Paris. Yours Hassan."

"Well, I can't see much harm in those letters. They're very dull. What does the schoolmistress say to Master Hassan's correspondence?"

"As a matter of fact we very seldom write when I am at school. There's nothing to write about except to let him know when I am going home and to ask him to come down as soon as he can. All these letters have been received here. I generally send him a line as soon as I get back from school."

Aunt Olive was satisfied that there was nothing in Phil's correspondence to which she could object. She dropped the subject and let things take their course, a procedure that was much more to her taste than opposing her self-willed niece.

Some months later Aunt Olive had a serious illness that altered the domestic arrangements at the old Hall. It incapacitated her for all housekeeping, and kept her in bed for some weeks. She was missed on all sides. There was no one in the house who could take her place. She fretted at Joan's absence. Her husband and brother were concerned at the nervous condition into which she was falling.

"We had better send for that little hussy, Phil," said Dick, one morning when the doctor had been recommending a change of scene and air. "How old is she?"

"Nearly seventeen," replied Harry. "Rather young to leave school in these days."

"My mother took up housekeeping when she was sixteen and she was never any the worse for having left school at that age."

The medical man approved and Phillis was recalled, to her intense satisfaction. Olive Oakley was immediately relieved

of her anxiety when she heard that her niece was coming, and began to pick up at once. She no longer fretted at the absence of the direct supervision that she was accustomed to give to the house with its various "side lines," as Hassan and Jim called her dairy and poultry-yard.

Her husband anticipated a protest from her at the removal from school of Phillis sooner than had been planned, but none came. Poor Aunt Olive felt too weak and ill to be anything but grateful for a competent understudy whom she could trust.

By this time Phillis knew as much as her aunt how things should be done. She had old Betsy in the dairy and a cook who had ruled the kitchen ever since the death of the old mistress, both competent old servants who required little supervision.

As Phil slipped into her aunt's place at the end of the table her two uncles drew a breath of relief and felt that their little world had righted itself once more. As for Phil herself the new responsibilities that fell upon her young shoulders tended to sober her and bring to her consciousness the various duties she was expected to perform.

Another Christmas since Joan's departure came round. Phil was quite equal to the occasion. She was no longer the harum-scarum schoolgirl of the old days. Yet her high spirits and courage remained. Something in her home life was giving her new dignity and self-reliance, two qualities which banished the flippancy that had marked the schoolgirl. Aunt Olive noted the change with approval and was pleased. Joan's mantle had fallen on the younger girl, she thought.

In a few weeks Aunt Olive recovered from her indisposition. She came downstairs with kindly critical eyes but found nothing to complain of. She took up some of the threads of her old work but not all of them. Phil not only retained the most strenuous, but she developed and expanded them in accordance with modern progress and the latest appliances.

With regard to the poultry-yard she went in for intensive breeding and sold her clutches of eggs as pedigree settings. The old play-room was cleared of toys and the lumber that had delighted the heart of the child, and incubators were established. In the autumn she had the benefit of the reaped corn-fields, the perquisites of the farmer's wife. Here she started the fattening process. She bought largely of imported birds that came from the Netherlands and Belgium and did well over ducks and turkeys.

Uncle Dick waged war against the ducks and geese. He had no objection to the turkeys but he declared that the web-footed birds fouled the horse ponds which he tried to keep scrupulously clean for the use of the stock.

"Uncle Dick!" cried Phil, one day in despair. "I must—I really must have one of the horse ponds. Look here! Will you rent me one?"

"I can't spare either of those near the cattle-shed, nor the one next to the stables."

"I don't want any of those. The pond I should like to have is that which is in the middle of the "green acre" field. I'll give you a rent. I can afford two pounds a year easily for it and the meadow. I am sure that you don't get that amount out of it in these days. You can't lay the meadow down for hay. The grass is too poor."

Uncle Dick regarded her with a twinkle in his eye. She was a girl after his own heart with the hereditary instinct of the cultivator of the land running strongly in her veins. But he was not going to give in at once. It wouldn't do to let the rising generation think that they could have everything their own way for the asking.

"It's too far from the house for you," he objected.

"Nonsense! The lane leads right up to it. It might be too far off for you, but I can walk that short distance. Or better still I can bicycle or drive in the little old car."

Phil had inherited Joan's car and found it of use for the transport of grain and food needed for the poultry.

"You'll want a man to help you and I haven't one to spare," he objected.

"Oh, go along with you! You're a troublesome old dear. Mary who helps Betsy is all I want. No men for me please! There's a little shed at this end of the meadow where I can boil the grain and the meal."

"That shed is just about done for. I was thinking of pulling it down."

"Not a bit of it! I shall build it up and possibly add to it. It must have a good primus stove. I shall have my hen-coops about the place but they must be in a nice airy shed that is quite dry. If you want hens to lay they must be kept warm and dry. Ducks and geese don't mind the damp. Won't they just love the pond!"

"If I let you have the meadow I shall expect you to clear away all the poultry truck round about the house, every stick

of it. You've got your hen-coops in the orchard as well as by the cattle-sheds. I'm not sure that I haven't seen a coop or two in the stable."

Phil did not deny the charge.

"I had to put that setting of Orpington's where it was warm and dry."

"I won't have the fowls in the stables or the sheds. Old Watson, the head-teamster had something to say about 'our missie's goings on.' He vowed he would burn the lot of them."

Uncle Dick laughed at the memory of his head-man's indignation at the invasion.

"All right, Uncle Dick. If you'll let me have the meadow, I'll clear out clean and proper."

"And glad I shall be to see the last of you and your truck."

But Phil was not going to let him have it all his own way.

"Look here! There's one thing I bargain for. I won't have old Moll the sow up there. Talk of my ducks and geese and hens, she is ten times worse. She fouls every corner she can get in with her rootling little pigs and she devours the fowls' food before they can eat half of it."

"That reminds me, I must have those little mucks ringled or they will root up the whole place."

"If you let them stray into the meadow after I've taken over, I'll give you sucking-pig for dinner till you are sick of it."

He laughed, thoroughly enjoying the passage of arms.

"It's up to you to keep them out," he rejoined.

"Trust me! I'm going to fence my property round with strong wire-netting on one side. On the other where the shed is, I'll have sheep's hurdles. They will help to break the wind and give the fowls a little shelter. I can use them also for temporary enclosure for the ducks."

"My hurdles, I suppose. I don't know if I have any to spare."

"You need not worry, old darling! I shall buy my own hurdles. I shall want Joe, the shepherd to put them up but I'll pay him for his time."

"You will, will you? And nicely out of pocket you'll be when you have finished all your contraptions."

"Well? and if I am? I need not come down on you to make it good."

Again he laughed good-naturedly, fully appreciating her spirit of enterprise.

"Bless my soul! What a thing it is to have these young women of independent means to deal with! By the by do you want me to sign a contract about the bargain? Stamped of course. I shall have to refer you to my lawyer. His son has just passed his exams. and is coming into the business with his father as a junior partner."

"We'll do without the son. I know him, a lanky young man who doesn't know an old grey gander from a gobbler! If we have anyone we'll go to the father. He's a bit slow in the uptake but he's a nice old dear, like you, worth a dozen long-legged Jacks."

"Very well, we'll dispense with the contract."

"And I shall take over charge of my new property to-morrow," said Phil. "You will have to cart up my coops and movable hen-houses at your own expense because it is solely for your benefit that they are being cleared out."

"And if I find a duck on one of my horse-ponds—there's plenty of sage and onions in the garden."

"In which case the duck will be charged to your account together with the hens' eggs wanted in the kitchen."

"It isn't a lawyer chap you'll need for a husband, my dear," said Uncle Dick. "It must be a true-bred farmer."

"And he must know his business as well as you do, old dear."

She danced away full of delight at the thought of becoming a real Norfolk henwife starting on her own with a snug little poultry farm.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

(I)

JOAN and her husband went to India in the autumn of the year in which they were married. Lawrence managed to obtain a staff appointment. It promised better prospects than remaining with the regiment. He did not dislike the ordinary routine of soldiering, but a staff billet had many more advantages. It was not without its drawbacks and involved several changes before any permanency was in sight.

Finally, to their great satisfaction, they found themselves at Bangalore, a pleasant station with a fairly good climate. The appointment was to last two years, a period which promised a permanent settlement in a house of their own. The time would pass all too quickly, but as Lawrence told his wife, no one must dream of "rooting in" when it is a case of holding a country by force of arms.

Joan was delighted with the latest spot where they had come to rest. She was looking forward to having a flower garden at last which would not be a collection of battered pots with drought-stricken plants struggling for dear life. She did not intend to grow vegetables. They could be bought cheaply in the market. But Bangalore was famous for its roses and many subtropical plants. She was keen to begin. The sight of her neighbours' gardens had already made her mouth water.

She engaged two gardeners whose time was chiefly employed in watering. She spent her mornings under the pergolas made of stone uprights on which she grew ramblers of every kind procurable. Along the bamboo-latticed fence that bordered the garden the blue ipomœa, known as "Morning Glory," spread in profuse masses of azure that matched the colour of the heavens. Under the broken shade of the banyan trees the eucharis lily blossomed without any artificial heat, as freely as the narcissus in the temperate climate.

Joan felt that she deserved a little rest after all the travelling she had done, following her husband to the various acting employments that had been his fate since he returned to India.

As she admitted when she heard the joyful news that she was to have two years at Bangalore, she was getting a little tired of living in her boxes.

On this particular morning Joan had gathered a large bunch of eucharis lilies. She was carrying them to the bungalow when she heard her husband's voice calling her. He was in his sitting-room, which opened on to the veranda.

"Joan!" he cried, through the french window. "The English mail is in. There are two letters for you."

She entered the room by the window, still busy arranging her flowers in a neat bunch, wrapping their stalks in paper and tying them together with a piece of string. A glance at the two envelopes told her that one was from Phillis and the other from Aunt Olive, her two faithful correspondents who never missed sending the welcome weekly letter. She finished off her bunch of eucharis lilies and laid it on the side-table where the letters for delivery awaited despatch.

"Send these flowers to the hospital by the peon when he has his messages to deliver, please."

She took up her letters from the writing-desk where they were lying and cut both the envelopes open in leisurely fashion. She seated herself in an easy chair not far from her husband's, her own place when she invaded his sanctum. Aunt Olive's letter came first. It always contained a coherent account of the home news of the week, picking up the threads where she had left off the previous week. The home news was usually more or less prosaic and common-place in its detail, although Phil's version was apt to slop over and have a hysterical touch here and there when her beloved fowls met with a violent and unexpected end, or the houseboat had been hung up in a bed of reeds and the assistance of a wherry-man had been required to extricate it. The elder woman's news, written in her calm even way, duly qualified Phil's outpourings which otherwise might have been disturbing.

Lawrence had returned to his desk and was getting on with his correspondence which went mostly into long official envelopes marked "On Service." Joan read half the first page of Aunt Olive's letter. An exclamation of dismay escaped her lips. Lawrence looked up, swung himself round on his office chair startled into sudden attention.

"Nothing wrong with the old people, I hope?" he said.

"Oh, Lawrence!" she gasped. "Read what Aunt Olive says! I can't believe it!"

He asked no questions but held out his hand for the sheet which Joan relinquished without any effort to read further. The very first words gave him a shock. Aunt Olive wrote without any preamble.

"I don't know what you will both say to my news. Phillis has engaged herself to be married to Hassan."

Then followed at full length, the how, when, and where it happened. They had been boating on the broads with a party for the summer holidays and it appeared to be the outcome of the entertainment. She did not approve of it, and definitely expressed her opinion. Dick was dead against the marriage and Harry declared such a thing to be impossible. No one had suspected that there was anything springing up between the young people. If an attachment was beginning to form, they had all three concluded that Jim Armstrong was the one to be attracted, and that Phil preferred him to any other of her admirers. Phillis was thoroughly English in all her tastes and it seemed out of all belief that she could dream of marrying an Asiatic. Had Hassan been an Italian or Spaniard, the two young people might have dropped into it if they had seen much of each other. But an Indian——!

"Phil must be mad!" concluded Aunt Olive in unusual distress.

Lawrence handed back the letter.

"I quite agree with Aunt Olive. Phillis must be mad," he said. "She is too young to know what she is doing."

"I am afraid Aunt Olive, since her illness, has weakened in her control. The girl has too much liberty and is losing her head," said Joan.

"Quite likely. She should not have left school for another year at least."

"Anyway, what are the two uncles thinking about to allow it?" asked Joan.

"That's the most extraordinary thing about it," said Lawrence.

"What is?"

"That they should all have been so blind to the possibilities of the intimate association with a good-looking man like Hassan."

"How could they tell that there was any danger in it? I saw no danger in my friendship with Hassan."

"Did he ever make love to you?" asked Lawrence, gazing keenly at her as though he would probe the very depths of her heart.

"Never! never!" protested his wife, with a touch of indignation.

"He never tried to kiss you?"

"Never!" she repeated angrily. Somehow she felt hurt at being asked such personal questions.

"You must admit that he was exceptionally placed in having been admitted into your family circle on such an intimate footing. Darling! forgive me!"

He saw the faint colour flood her cheeks and hastened to make amends.

"I know, dearest. You need not reassure me."

"I had no lover before you came into my life, Lawrence!"

"I also know, my well-beloved wife, that you were never such a giddy young goat as your sister."

"Would you call Phil a giddy young goat? She has a strong vein of common sense when she isn't carried away on the wings of a thoughtless impulse," said Joan, in defence of her sister.

"Joan, do you remember the last Christmas you spent at the Hall?"

"Yes, dear, of course I do. It is one of my happiest memories because I had you with me. I shall never forget it."

"It was an incident connected with the mistletoe that I want you to recall after Phil had boisterously dragged Uncle Dick under the mistletoe and chased me. The old man went off to his smoking-room with Uncle Harry, and Aunt Olive retired to the drawing-room."

"Yes, but I don't remember anything special happening."

"We stayed for a few minutes in the front hall where we had hung the mistletoe bough."

"Yes, what about it? We were carrying on like a lot of silly-billies but being Christmas it didn't matter."

"I'm not so sure about that," he replied. "It was Phil who was at her wildest, off her head with excitement and her glass of punch. I shall never forget the way she rushed at Hassan. She dragged him under the mistletoe and gave him a smacking kiss on his cheek."

"Phil is nothing unless she is the wildest of the lot on occasions like that," responded Joan in her strong love for her sister.

"You didn't notice as I did the expression on the face of the Indian as he received her salute."

"No, I was too much amused at her wild games."

"Many of the daughters of Indians are married at her age although the Moslems prefer to wait until they are seventeen," said Scott.

"What has that got to do with it?" asked Joan, who was still feeling bewildered from the first shock of the news.

"You looked upon her as a child when she was playing her pranks with Hussan. In his eyes she was no longer a child. How old was he?"

"He must have been over twenty."

"Just so. He was no longer a boy from the Oriental point of view. Most Moslems of all classes, rich and poor, have been provided with a wife by the time they have reached that age."

"Hassan has lived so long in England that he is more English than India," said Joan.

"His manners and behaviour are like his clothes. They cover the real man. I watched him under Phil's unexpected onslaught. He seemed to awake suddenly and take fire. Then I saw the danger of all this friendliness to which he had been admitted and of which all you innocent people were unaware. None of you had ever been in India, and unless you had seen with your own eyes the men and women of Hassan's country, of course you couldn't understand the danger of the situation."

"Why didn't you tell Aunt Olive?"

"What would have been the good?" he asked impatiently. "You must see the country to comprehend it. Even its climate cannot be understood from mere description. You must grill under a tropical sun before you can claim to know its heat. If you remember I went as far as inquiring of you how soon Hassan was returning to India. My question didn't convey anything to your mind?"

"No," she replied faintly, for she was not speaking the truth strictly. The only suspicion that it had raised was that he might have felt a spasm of jealousy over her own regard for the companion of her teens.

(2)

They remained silent for a while, Joan deeply troubled and Lawrence full of concern on his wife's behalf. By this time Joan had gained full knowledge of the attitude taken by Europeans out in India towards mixed marriages, and the

extremely difficult position in which an Englishwoman placed herself when she formed a tie with an Indian. It was not altogether easy to reconcile oneself to the union of an Englishman with a woman of Oriental birth. It was ten times more difficult to accept the union when it was the other way about, and an Englishwoman of pure birth gave herself to an Asiatic.

"What does Phil say on the subject?" he asked presently.

Joan took up her sister's letter which so far she had not opened. The sheets were filled with the girl's large handwriting, thin strokes upwards and heavy downstrokes, revealing determination and a strong will. Joan handed the letter to her husband.

"Just like her! Impetuous to incoherency! A highly coloured description of what she calls her 'pash' for Hassan, and his for her. The opposition of the elders, the aunt and two uncles, she sweeps aside with the intolerance of the modern girl for the opinions of people they call 'obsolete,' 'back-numbers' and 'die-hards.'"

When Phillis had exhausted her powers of description of her personal emotions, she deigned to write of what she called her plans.

Hassan's father had decided that it was time for his son to come out to India and take up the work for which he was destined. In addition to serving in the bureau of the Hyderabad Branch of the Stores, he was to learn his father's business with a view of stepping into his shoes, and becoming like him one of the agents for supplying the enormous household of the Nizam.

This decision on the part of his parent troubled Hassan more than a little. He confided in Phil his unwillingness to leave England and all that it held for him. It was much more of a home than the house at Hyderabad which he had left when he was only nine years old. He was old enough now to choose his line in life for himself.

Phillis was seventeen but she possessed the dominant character of a girl of twenty or more. She was self-confident, bold and reckless. She had a handsome allowance from her guardians which added to her independence and enabled her frequently to take a strong line where her will dictated.

"You must tell your father that you have made up your mind to stay in England," she said firmly, when she had heard him through. "You like your work in England?"

"More than I can say; and I have made so many good

friends, friends I can't possibly replace in India, like Jim Armstrong for instance."

"It is too great a sacrifice. No, it is out of the question," she said decisively. "You are not going to leave England under the present circumstances." Not if I know it! old darling!"

"I don't see how it is to be avoided. If my father insists——"

"I suppose he will have some regard for his son's wishes?"

"Not if I am breaking away from promises that I have made. Phil! I shall have to go," said Hassan, and he added pathetically. "How shall I ever be able to leave you Phil, flower of my heart!"

"If you go, I go too," was her astounding reply.

"You! But how, my pearl!"

"As your wife," said Phil, without hesitation.

All this she repeated in her letter to Joan, who could picture the scene.

"Just as I feared!" cried Joan, throwing the sheets down on her husband's desk. "It was she who proposed this outrageous marriage, not Hassan."

"I can quite believe it. He was not the one to give the kiss under the mistletoe. He would not have dared to do so," replied Lawrence. "And what is more I don't believe he would have ventured to propose marriage, either to Phil or to any other English girl."

Joan did not deny his statement. She read the last paragraph of her sister's letter not without a spasm of dismay akin to real alarm.

"I am already beginning to get my trousseau ready," wrote the reckless girl. "There's lots of time to make our plans, although I shall be quite ready for any emergency if Hassan's father forces it upon us. If Hassan is obliged to go out to India he will leave in the autumn, not before. He doesn't want to be landing in the middle of the hot weather. He tells me that the heat is great in the summer. This is only March. We shall be married just before we sail."

(3)

"Lawrence it's impossible, from whichever way we look at it," cried Joan, when she had finished reading the letter. "If Hassan remained in England such a marriage would be equally

impossible. If they came out to India as husband and wife it would be a—a calamity."

"It would be a jolly sight worse for Phil out here than if she stayed in England."

"Think of her position in the sight of the Europeans out here," continued Joan.

"The Europeans would have little chance of getting a sight of her," he said grimly.

"You mean that she would be shut up in a harem?"

"In all probability. I don't see what else could happen. She would have to live in her father-in-law's house. Hassan would not be in a position to have a big house of his own. He certainly could not live in Hyderabad as we do here in a bungalow like this."

"What are we to do?" cried Joan in despair.

"There's one thing upon which we may congratulate ourselves. Phil speaks of a six months' engagement from March to September. This gives us time."

"I know Phil well enough to be sure that time won't help to break it off. If it was six years, instead of months, nothing would turn her from her purpose when once her mind was made up."

"Obstinacy is certainly one of her strongest characteristics."

He was silent in deep consideration of the problem how best they could work upon Phil's common sense and make her see the many dangerous pitfalls about her action. She had dignity and pride, as well as the reckless courage which was prompting greater sacrifices than she comprehended.

"I shall write strongly and say that I forbid the marriage and that you back me up."

"What's that?" he cried, coming out of his reverie. She repeated her proposal.

"My dear, you must do nothing of the sort! You have no authority whatever, nor have I. With a girl of Phil's temperament, it would be fatal to take up a false position. She would be driven into asserting herself. She would persuade Hassan into making a registry marriage in a hurry. This must be avoided at all hazards. In such a case the mischief would be done without any hope of repair."

Joan listened wide-eyed and wondering at her husband's wisdom.

"Surely you wouldn't have me give Phil my blessing and encourage her to carry on in her mad scheme?"

"She won't need our blessing or any encouragement."

"What are we to do, then?"

"Play for time. To begin with, you must express great surprise and a strong hope that everything will turn out for her happiness."

"That will cut no ice with Phil."

"I'm afraid it won't help your Aunt Olive much," admitted Lawrence.

"It would bring down Uncle Harry's wrath on our heads if he thought for a moment that we were encouraging it," Joan pointed out.

"If we are indefinite in what we say, we shall do no harm and rouse no wrath, particularly when you and they at home hear what I have to propose."

Joan looked up with a vague hope in her eyes.

"I propose that Phil comes here to us on a visit, and if everything goes smoothly, which it will not, she can marry Hassan from here. I shall take care that she does not marry him with blind eyes. She shall see everything that is before her, all the snags and difficulties that are inseparable from a mixed marriage. Then if she still wants to be a Mussulman's wife——"

"And then what—?" she asked as he paused with a frown.

"She may go hang!"

"But, Lawrence, shan't we be letting ourselves in for a pack of troubles? What will people say if we help on such a marriage in the face of the strong prejudice that exists?"

"It's a risk," he admitted. "But I believe it will turn out all right. I have great faith in Phil's common sense. When once she understands what it means being shut up in a big Indian city, I am sure that her independence will rebel against it."

Lawrence had not spent years in a mounted regiment without picking up some real horse-sense. In training the young animals for their disciplined service, he knew the danger of the curb and the necessity for giving rein in the first exuberance of unbroken youth. Phil must not be ridden on the curb.

"Dearest!" he said, turning to Joan once more. "I am going to ask you a favour. Will you let me see your letter to Phil before you fasten it down?"

"With pleasure. I have no secrets from you."

"We must have time to discuss the matter further before we

commit ourselves to opinions on paper that will add fuel to fire."

"What shall I say, then, speak like a book or talk and rave like an angry relation? I feel inclined to rate her like a fish-wife."

"You mustn't do that, darling. Just put down the pros and cons as you think of them and tell her plainly what it will be like to live in India as the wife of an Indian."

"Nothing less than hell if I really say what I think. I'll do my best, Lawrence," she replied, very unlike the fish-wife she threatened to take as her model. There were tears in her eyes as she spoke. "If it had only been good old Jim Armstrong instead of Hassan!"

"Cheer up, old girl! It may yet be Jim if we walk warily."

CHAPTER TWENTY

(I)

THREE days after the arrival of the bombshell by the English mail, Lawrence and Joan received to their great surprise a call from the Palace Agent himself.

The Sahib arrived in an up-to-date Daimler. He came during the calling hours prescribed by Anglo-Indian society. Joan was seated at her bureau in the drawing-room. She was rewriting and remodelling her momentous letter to Phil, in which every third or fourth sentence seemed to contain an urgent invitation to come and see for herself what the life would be like.

Joan could not help reproaching Hassan for having made such a proposal. Yet when she reread Phil's account of how it happened, she could not honestly blame him. The conviction strengthened that it was not his fault. It was Phillis who had taken the initiative, as she had done under the mistletoe, and had proposed marriage to Hassan. If left to himself, thought Joan in the honesty of her soul, he would never have dared to aspire to such a union.

The manservant announced the Sahib with as much deference as he would have shown in introducing royalty. He had never seen the Palace Agent, but from the Sahib's appearance and from what the chauffeur conveyed he judged that the caller was some great man. The butler made a deep salaam such as he would have given to his Excellency the Resident.

Adam-u-din descended from the car and moved up the steps of the portico. Joan caught sight of him and recognized the stately figure. She sprang to her feet and went forward to meet him. He wore a long embroidered coat of deep crimson velvet. His costume beneath the coat was strictly European, silk shirt, black tie and dark trousers with gold stripes down the sides. On his head was the familiar turban of muslin on which sparkled diamond ornaments.

"Sahib!" she cried, using the old name by which she had known him at Hyderabad. For a moment her imagination brought up the figure of her father standing by his side.

In his hand he carried a large round box of Turkish delight. He advanced towards her holding it out as of old when she was a small girl.

"Has our little missie lost her taste for the sweets of her childhood?" he asked with a smile on his still handsome face.

"How good of you to remember my weakness! I have had none like that which you used to give me. I can remember everything although I was only eleven when I went home to England."

"You can't get this sweet anywhere except in Istambul. I have a regular supply for the palace. The ladies love it. It is pure honey and camel's milk, the most wholesome sweet they can have. Do you recollect the Palace Agent, your father's friend?"

"Yes, oh, yes!" She gave him both her hands in her welcome. "I can see you still with dear little Faith in your arms. She was very ill at the time. I remember how she dropped her head on your shoulder and closed her eyes, as though she never wanted to leave your arms and go back to that old ayah, Mariama."

"I am afraid the child disliked the old woman."

"I know that she did, and I feel sure that Mariama let my sister slip through her fingers in her ignorance," said Joan.

"My wife could see how ill Faith was and how much she needed skilled nursing. She wanted to keep her, but I could not consent. The child would have wound herself round our hearts and broken them when she was given back to be taken to England."

"I often wonder what is the true history of Faith. Did the ayah keep her for herself and then lose her after we left?"

"Impossible to say," he said gravely.

"Anyway, I feel morally certain that she died. We tried to find a record of her burial. It was wanted because of the money that should have been hers on my grandfather's death."

"It was a large sum?" he asked.

"It amounted to several thousand pounds. The lawyers decided at the end of a certain time to write her down as deceased, as they called it, and the money was divided between Phillis and me. The accounts of my father's and grandfather's estates could then be closed."

"Faith and Phillis were wonderfully alike, if I remember aright," remarked the Palace Agent.

"Except in colouring. Faith was very fair with yellowish hair and blue-grey eyes. I can just recall her to mind. Phillis is darker, hazel eyes and hair a warm brown. Except for the colouring, you could not at that time have told one from the other. They were of a similar disposition. Phil has the same lively temperament and is full of activity."

"Do you remember that dreadful little bungalow to which the ayah took you when you had to turn out of the Manager's house?" he asked.

"Oh, don't I! With its rats and snakes in the rafters of the roof. I can see the fat snake swollen with the rat it had swallowed when it fell from the roof and lay on the floor close to Faith's cot. I screamed for the ayahs. They were having their midday meal and had left us alone. We might have been bitten."

"Rat snakes are not poisonous. You really were in no danger," he assured her.

"Still, it wasn't pleasant."

Joan rose from her chair.

"Sahib, I am going to call my husband. He will be very pleased to see you and have a talk. We would like to discuss the news that has come to us in the letters of the latest mail from England."

"It is the chief object of my visit," he said quietly. "I, too, have had a letter from my son Hassan."

She ran to her husband's sitting-room and said in a low voice:

"Lawrence, my visitor is Hassan's father."

"Good!" was his reply. "Now we shall get on with the job. I wonder what he will have to say."

"He's an old friend," she warned him. "He was wonderfully good to us in the old days. Don't offend him if you can possibly help it."

"Is he likely to take offence?" he asked.

"Not if he is anything like the old Sahib I once knew," she replied reassuringly.

They returned to the drawing-room. Lawrence was agreeably surprised in their visitor. He found him courteous and suave, possessed of all the dignity of the old-fashioned Indian gentleman who had not adopted the casual ways of the West. Lawrence responded in the same spirit. It needed no help from Joan to put them on a friendly footing. The Palace Agent spoke of Godfrey Belton and described him as a man

of the world whom it was a pleasure to claim as a friend. Joan's eyes moistened as she listened to the description so warmly given and so sincere. But he did not linger on the subject. He had come for the express purpose of discussing his son's letter containing the announcement of his engagement to Phillis. Joan spoke.

"We too have heard about the engagement. My husband knows my opinion on the subject. He will tell you what it is. Perhaps you may see your way out of the difficulty more clearly than we do at present."

She sighed and looked so dejected that her visitor was sorry for her. He wanted to comfort her as of old and reassure her that everything would be done for the best, as far as was within his power.

"Have no fear, little missie, Mrs. Scott, I ought to say, but I still see the Joan of the old days as I look at you. I think we shall be able to settle the matter to your satisfaction."

He turned to Lawrence as though he thought that he was the proper person to discuss the position. There would be less opportunity of distressing Joan, and probably the English officer who knew his India well would be better able to comprehend the situation.

"May we know what Hassan has to say about it?" asked Lawrence.

"He writes that he is very much in love with Phil and she with him. Nothing less than marriage will satisfy them."

"You, Sahib, are of course dead against such an alliance?"

The Palace Agent did not reply immediately. He was considering his words. He spoke English fluently and had no difficulty in expressing himself. He was as anxious as Joan herself not to give offence. Yet the truth had to be told and the details quietly considered.

"I am not necessarily against the marriage," he said slowly, "but you will agree with me that it is not a thing to be taken in hand lightly."

"Our own marriage service warns us of that," remarked Lawrence.

He was agreeably surprised again at the temperate reply he had received. He had been prepared for a violent objection on the part of the Sahib. He waited for a further expression of opinion from Adam-u-din. The visitor continued in the same level tone devoid of emotion.

"Before a mixed marriage of this kind can take place there

are several points for the bride and her family to consider. I take it that with me you would wish to see these young people regularly married by ties that are honourable and binding on both sides?" continued the Sahib.

"Undoubtedly, if they are to be married at all," said Lawrence, with increasing warmth. In spite of his efforts at self-control, he found it very difficult to reconcile himself to any union of the kind. "It is absolutely necessary that the marriage should be legal and in strict accordance with the laws of both nations."

"You will not be satisfied with the ceremony performed in your church or the registry office, whichever they may choose?"

"Certainly not," replied Lawrence.

"Nor shall I be satisfied either," the Sahib responded quickly. "Mr. Godfrey Belton was my esteemed friend from the time he arrived in Hyderabad until his death. I made his acquaintance when he was at Bellary and we had no branch of the Stores at Hyderabad. I could never consent to anything that dishonoured his name and his family."

Lawrence was immensely relieved by these words, although he was at present quite ignorant of what they involved. The Muhammadan rose in his estimation several degrees. He was unexpectedly temperate, and as level-headed as any business man. He spoke in cultured tones without raising his voice to the high pitch so often assumed when men of the East get hot and excited over a subject that is near to their hearts. The Sahib continued:

"If my son and your wife's sister insist on this marriage, which seems likely from Hassan's letter, there must be a Muhammadan ceremony that will be equally binding on the man."

"Indeed, I am glad you see it from that point," said Lawrence.

"Otherwise we shall have them husband and wife only in British territory. If Hassan follows the line he has taken up, of serving in the Stores and eventually becoming a supply agent for the palace like myself, he will have to live in Hyderabad, the capital of the Nizam's State. There, with only the Christian rites, Phillis would be nothing but his mistress. Such a position would lower her in the eyes of the Moslems, among whom she would be living. We are a proud people, as you must know, Major Scott. Not only would she be

despised, but he would be held in contempt for having formed a tie with a woman whose children would be illegitimate, with no legal claim on their father. You follow me, Major Scott?"

Lawrence's Indian officers in the regiment were Muhammadans. He knew their pride and their national instinctive hatred of fathering illegitimate sons. Even if a man took a woman for one night only and divorced her the next day, he went through a short form of temporary marriage that would give the child of such a union a legal position.

"Yes," he replied, slowly. "The Indian officers of my regiment are Moslems, and I have learnt something of their views, although I can't say that I know much of the details of their rites and ceremonies."

"I suppose Phillis would have no objection to the Muhammadan marriage?" remarked the Palace Agent.

"That must be left for her to decide. The marriage form is not formidable," replied Lawrence.

"What does it involve?" asked Joan.

The Sahib hesitated in his answer.

"Of course there are conditions."

"Dress and the veil?" she said.

"Not necessarily, unless her husband asked her to adopt it."

"Seclusion?" she went on.

"There again she and her husband would naturally come to some amicable agreement as to the best course to pursue. We could not compel them to follow any particular line," replied the Palace Agent.

He seemed genuinely to favour moderation and concession.

"Is there any other condition that she is likely to be asked to agree to?"

The Sahib regarded them both with serious eyes.

"You understand," he said slowly, his gaze passing from Joan to her husband, "you fully realize that Phillis would have to be received into our religion. She must become an orthodox follower of the Prophet—may he rest in peace!"

His listeners were startled. This was a contingency that had not occurred to them. Lawrence was about to protest against such a demand, but thought it best to keep silent for the present. It was a step which only Phillis could decide.

"After this has been done," continued the Sahib smoothly, "the marriage can be performed by the Kadi wherever they choose. My consent would not be necessary, although I should give it willingly and attend the ceremony."

"What would be her position on the completion of both the forms of marriage?" asked Lawrence.

"She would be honoured by all men of my nation as my son's wife, and I should feel personally as if I had been true to my old friend, her father."

There was yet another point which in the opinion of Lawrence should be made clear.

"Forgive me if I put another question," he said, in the same even tone adopted by his visitor. "The Koran allows a Muhammadan more than one wife."

"That is so. He knew the weakness of man," agreed the Sahib.

"If Phillis accepts all the conditions which you have mentioned, she will naturally be his chief wife and the mistress of his harem?"

Joan suppressed a smile as she pictured her rampageous sister as the head of a houseful of gosha women. The Sahib continued in his even tones.

"I am afraid that what you propose about her position in her husband's house or quarters—for Hassan will live under my roof—would be impossible. She could only be his second wife."

"Surely your son is not already married!" cried Joan and Lawrence together.

"His first wife was chosen for him by his parents many years ago as is the custom." He glanced at Lawrence, who probably was aware of the custom, if, as he had said, he had been in close contact with Moslems in his regiment. The English officer nodded. "Certain ceremonies—you might regard them as a species of betrothal; we regard them as part of the marriage tie—were performed by us before witnesses during his absence in England. They are binding. Under no circumstances whatever can they be broken or cancelled. Nor can they be repeated with any other woman. Bride and bridegroom do not meet, as you are aware"—again he appealed to the man who should know his India, and Lawrence nodded his assent—"until the marriage is to be consummated. A few more ceremonies have to be performed, but they are trivial to those which have gone before. They will take place as soon as my son arrives. He will then live with his bride in his mother's rooms until Phillis comes out, when he will be ready for the second wedding."

"Good Heavens!" cried Lawrence, as he threw himself back in his chair.

It was difficult to restrain his laughter as he pictured Phil taking a back seat, which would be her term for the position, in a Moslem household already in the firm rule of a mother-in-law. He knew enough about the etiquette of the man with whom he was speaking to be aware that laughter would be out of place and would most likely give offence. All Lawrence could say was that the situation was full of difficulties with which Phillis, the chief person concerned, must deal herself.

The Sahib was not in the least offended by the surprise expressed in the exclamation of the Englishman.

"Miss Phillis must certainly be allowed the privilege of deciding on her own course of conduct."

"Wouldn't it be better, between ourselves, to oppose the marriage from the very beginning?" said Lawrence.

"When you are my age, sir, you will know that opposition leads nowhere and only lands people in difficulties."

(2)

The Sahib rose to take his leave.

"You will write to Miss Phillis, Mrs. Scott, and put everything before her. On no account may we take advantage of her ignorance."

"I will tell her all that you have said," Joan assured him. She was fingering the delicate platinum chain, with its precious gems. "Before you go, Sahib, I want to thank you very warmly for this beautiful wedding present which you must have helped your son to buy. I did write at the time."

"And I duly received the letter. I am glad you were pleased with it."

She allowed the diamonds to fall back on her neck.

"I hope to send Phillis some pearls," he remarked.

His dark eyes dwelt upon the face of the girl he had known as a child. Until she was eleven years old he had seen her frequently. She had fulfilled the promise of her youth, and possessed the prettiness of her mother. He recalled to mind the sweet, gentle Englishwoman who used to thank him so gracefully for those round boxes of the real Turkish delight that Joan revelled in, and Violet greedily devoured

when the child had no mother to protect her rights. The Sahib wondered if Phillis, who was now proposing to be his daughter-in-law, had grown as pretty as Joan. It was perhaps not surprising that his son had lost his heart to her, but there was one point on which he was puzzled. He had been careful to keep his son informed of all that had been done in the way of making the customary marriage for him, with a girl of the parents' choosing. How was it that Hassan had acted on his own initiative and entered into negotiations with another girl of whom they knew practically nothing? Had he adopted Western ways to the extent of acting independently of his parents? He had shown no sign in any of his letters of this new phase in his conduct. It was Joan who enlightened him and explained how it was that the engagement had come about.

"Sahib!" she said, looking up at him with eyes that reminded him of the occasion when she told him of the dreadful rats and snakes that lived in the roof of the little bungalow. "You don't oppose the marriage, do you?"

"As I said to your husband just now, it is advisable not to oppose it. If it is the will of Allah, it will take place."

Joan could no longer restrain herself.

"Oh, Sahib! You are an old friend, and I feel that I must speak out plainly to you whatever you may think. I don't like the prospect of the marriage. I don't like it at all!"

"I can't say that it appeals to me either, but I wish to be fair and just to my son," he replied quietly.

"I am frightened," said Joan, and she looked it as she spoke. Her nerves were giving way. "Phillis is only seventeen years of age. She is too young to know what she is doing. From her letter I gather that she was the one to propose the marriage——"

"Is that so?" he asked.

"Apparently. She cannot make Hassan happy under the conditions that you say are necessary for a marriage. Nor will he ever be able to give her all that she wants. Oh, Sahib, I dread the consequences!"

"You believe that the proposal came from Phillis?" he asked.

She was not aware of the importance it was to the father to know that his son was not repudiating the law of his race, and in effect disobeying the commands of his parents.

"I am sure of it. I have it in writing from herself. She says in her letter to me that she suggested it. It was done on the spur of the moment perhaps and without thought. We must not lay the blame on Hassan."

She gave him her hand which he took in both of his as if to soothe and reassure her.

"My child! Allah's will must be done, as you say in your own prayer, 'Thy will be done.' It is the prayer of your Prophet, as great as Muhammad himself. Be patient, and all will come right."

He lifted her hand to his lips reverently, as if she were some honoured princess.

"I must go. I have taken up too much of your husband's valuable time as it is. I will come and see you again when I have heard from my son. By that time you also will have received another letter from your sister."

Lawrence accompanied him to the car that was waiting. He glanced at his visitor, wondering what was hidden beneath the inscrutable smile that rested on the Palace Agent's lips. Was he satisfied with the interview? Was he indifferent to the issue of the affair? Lawrence thought not. Was the Sahib reconciled to the connection because of the money that the English girl would have? It seemed unlikely. Sahib Adam-u-din's wealth was great. A few thousand pounds settled on the girl would make little difference to a man of his substance. The placid, undisturbed attitude that he had maintained throughout the visit perplexed Lawrence, whose knowledge of the Moslems made him fully conscious that the union was not desirable in the eyes of the Palace Agent.

Lawrence turned back into the drawing-room, where Joan stood as her visitor had left her. He linked his arm in hers and led her to his room. The excitement of seeing the old friend of her youth had kept her spirits up, but now a reaction was setting in. As she lifted her eyes to her husband he could see that they were moist and that the tears were not far off. For a moment a spasm of anger passed through him. What right had Phil to play the fool in this manner and upset his wife?

"Sit down, darling, and pull yourself together. Things might have been much worse if we had been obliged to discuss this intimate matter with an irate Moslem, ignorant, prejudiced and above all overbearing. I am afraid that you have had a shock."

"Nothing like what it will be to Phillis!"

"Well, I don't pity her. She has asked for it."

"What are we to do?"

"Write as we originally intended," replied Lawrence. "There is one satisfaction. We shall know what to say."

"Will you write to Phil?" she asked.

"No; I shall leave that to you. I must explain fully what the conditions are to Mr. Belton and to Mr. Oakley. You must also write to Aunt Olive," he continued. "You will have to tell them both exactly what you have learnt from the Sahib. He is a very fine character. When he first appeared I prepared myself for no end of a bust-up. But it didn't come. He behaved like a courtly old gentleman throughout."

"I shall have to say first that Hassan already has a wife who is to be chief."

"Yes, and don't mince matters. Put the statement as plainly as you can."

"Secondly, that Phil will have to become a Muhammadan before the ceremony is performed, and will have to observe all their feasts and fasts."

Joan laughed tremulously in spite of her trouble. "I can't see Phil, in a veil, doing anything of the sort. She has never been very churchy—too much of the farmer's daughter about her, with her dairy and fowl-yard—but she is regular in her attendance at church on Sundays and always very active in decorating it on the different festivals. Picture Phil as a gosha lady shrinking from the gaze of a man! Not quite in her line."

"Yes, and you might throw out a few hints about the mother-in-law," said Lawrence, as he joined with his wife in her laugh.

"I don't know which I should pity most, Phil or her mother-in-law," said Joan. "Oh, what a mess she has got into! And—oh, Lawrence!"

"Yes, darling, what is it?"

"I have suddenly thought of something which would spill all the fat into the fire. What if, in her impetuous way, she insists on marrying Hassan before we can communicate with her?"

"That would complicate matters," he replied, all signs of amusement and laughter dying out of his face. "We must do our best to stop any rash act of that kind."

"What can we do at this distance?" she asked.

"I shall send your uncle a cable to say that the marriage cannot take place, as Hassan has a wife already in India."

"It will startle them all, but will they really believe it?"

"The Sahib has kept his son informed of all that has taken place out here in India. Hassan must be fully aware of his position. They will only have to ask him to explain the situation to learn what we have been told. Our letters will follow the cable in fifteen days. I cannot help thinking that when Phil realizes the conditions imposed upon her she will immediately withdraw from the engagement."

"I am sure of it!" responded Joan. "And if I am not mistaken Hassan will come in for a stormy time."

"She will have brought it on herself, as I said before," remarked Lawrence. "By her own showing it was she who proposed marriage."

"How soon will you send the cable?"

"Now, at once. As soon as I can get it off."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

(I)

THE cable was reduced on the score of economy to five words. It ran as follows:

Marriage impossible wife in India.

It was addressed to Richard Belton. It arrived on a Friday afternoon. He had taken his midday dinner—he refused to allow it to be called lunch—and was about to go down to the marshes. It was necessary to see that repairs to gates and railings had been done before turning out the stock for the summer months. His experience told him that no one could do this supervision so well as the owner.

He took the disturbing missive to his sister and handed it over without a word. She read it aloud, unable at first to absorb its full meaning.

“Dick!” she gasped, bewildered by the astounding statement. “What is the meaning of this?”

“That’s what I want to know,” he replied grimly.

“It’s incomprehensible.”

“Unless it refers to Hassan.”

“It can’t refer to anyone else,” said Aunt Olive.

Dick was slow in thought, but he was level-headed and had plenty of self-possession; Olive was apt to get flurried and to lose her head.

“This is a matter which Hassan alone can explain,” he said. “We must give him a chance of doing so on his next visit.”

“Perhaps Phillis may be able to explain it,” said Aunt Olive.

“Where is she?”

“Just off to look after her last batch of young turkeys out of the incubator.”

He hurried away and shouted for his niece, stopping her in time, as she was about to drive away to what she called her chicken farm.

"Hello, Uncle Dick! What are you losing your hair about?" asked the irreverent young woman. "You've none to spare, old dear!"

He thrust the cable message at her.

"Here, read this, you young hussy, and then talk about keeping your own hair on. It's raised mine, I can tell you!"

They moved towards the morning-room that Aunt Olive had made her own, and Phil read the wire.

"This isn't intended for you, Uncle Dick!"

"As your guardian, I think it is," he replied. "It's from Lawrence, and it is addressed to me. I take it that the cable refers to you and Hassan. You are the only one of the family who is thinking of getting married."

"And it asks us to believe that Hassan already has a wife in India! It's too ridiculous for words!" and she burst into a hearty laugh which was genuine.

"Apparently that's the meaning of the message," said her uncle, who saw nothing amusing in the serious charge brought against her lover.

"I feel half-inclined to cable back to that village idiot, Lawrence: 'Tell us another!'"

"But, my dear Phil!" said her aunt. "Hadn't we better find out from Hassan if there is any truth in it?"

"Certainly! To be sure!" responded Phil impatiently, her mirth subsiding. "We will let Hassan have his say and explain the mystery; but I don't see how he is to do it except by a straightforward denial. He came to England when he was nine years old, a child, not even a schoolboy. Are we to believe that he was a married man? We didn't make his acquaintance until he was thirteen. Even at that age he was a shy, backward boy, younger for his age than an English boy would have been."

"If there isn't something in it I shall be surprised," remarked Uncle Dick, who was not disposed to turn down lightly such a serious allegation as the cable contained.

"It's a leg-pull," declared Phil.

"Lawrence wouldn't play a trick like that on your uncle," said Aunt Olive, with a touch of severity. She was annoyed by Phil's flippant attitude. "If there had been any intention of a leg-pull, as you call it, Joan would have cabled to you personally. But I can't see Joan wasting her money on a feeble, purposeless joke like that. Cables from India cost something."

"I must be off to look at the marsh gates and the shelters for the beasts," said Dick, beginning to move away. "The nights are still frosty, too cold for them to lie out in the open after their shelters in the stock sheds. We are only just in April."

"That's it! The secret is out!" cried Phil, struck by a sudden thought as she turned about to follow her uncle out of the room. "It was intended for last Wednesday, April the 1st, All Fools' Day! Don't worry, Auntie dear, we'll get to the bottom of the mystery when Hassan comes——"

"Better still when the Indian mail is in, which will bring explanations that I hope will satisfy us all."

Aunt Olive, left alone with her endless needlework, could not help worrying over the situation. She had never liked the engagement, but she had tolerated it, trying to reconcile herself to having an Indian for a nephew. She knew very little of the East and the ways of the inhabitants. She had attended local missionary meetings and picked up odds and ends of information, as to the habits and customs of foreign places where Christianity had not yet spread. There had been one lady who had given them a highly coloured address, with details that made Mrs. Oakley shudder. It was on the subject of child marriage. Little girls were married to little boys of their own age, sometimes older. If the boys died the girls became widows. Their heads were shaved, and they were turned into household drudges. Then she remembered that Hassan was a Muhammadan. These people she had heard of were Hindus. She wondered if these dreadful marriage conditions were common to both. If so, it was quite possible that Hassan might have been married as a child. But if that was the case, would he propose marriage with another girl? It was all very perplexing. She must wait till Hassan explained away the mystery. Joan and Lawrence would write and make everything clear.

(2)

Phillis moved on her way through the passage that led to the back door where her car stood. A large bucket of bran had been boiled for her in the scullery. It stood steaming ready to be transferred to the car. She met Betsy the dairy-woman at the entrance. The wiry old woman took the heavy bucket of bran from Phil.

"Here, miss, let me carry it. It's a good tidy bit too heavy for your young arms."

"I wanted to see you, Betsy, about my young turkeys. I shall be glad if you will look after them on Sunday morning for me. I will have the food ready."

"Going away, miss?"

"No, I shall have a visitor. I must attend to his breakfast."

"That Mr. Hassan?" asked Betsy.

Something in her tone made Phillis exclaim.

"You don't like him, Betsy!"

"He's all right for what he is, and as God made him. But I don't think he's good enough for you, miss. And in my opinion he ain't no more of a prince than what our master is."

"A prince! Who calls him a prince?"

"The village folk say that he is a prince and that the people where he comes from are cannibals. I don't hold with black fellows that eat each other. It's unnatural."

Phil's ready laugh rang out.

"They're not black where Mr. Hassan comes from, and they don't eat each other."

"I reckon that Mr. Hassan is as brown as needs be. He's young yet, but by the time he's the age of the master he'll be right dark, if he ain't wholly black. He'll go like the pigs. When the old sow litters you hev' to look close at the little 'uns to see which will be white and which will be black and which spotted. If you marry him you'll have to look close at your children so as to sort 'em out. Like as not some will be white, some brown, and mayhap some speckled."

"Betsy! How you talk!" protested Phil, who could not help laughing.

"Well, miss! There's no getting away from Nature, not on the farm. A black boar and a white sow can't help themselves. They hev' to take what God sends them and that'll be according to Nature. It's the same with the cows. If the 'white sheet' cows go to old Billy the black bull, you can't reckon, not no-how, on the calves. And if the red cows go to old Billy, sure enough some of the calves will carry some black on 'em, if they ain't wholly black. Yes, miss, I'll look after the young turkeys for you."

"Thank you, Betsy," said Phil, taking her seat in the car.

"And do you get rid of Mr. Hassan on Sunday evening, just as quick as you can. If you doubt my word about

breeding black, when you being what you are ought to breed white, do you ask the master and he'll tell you the same. Ain't you just bought a fine Cochin cock for your old hens to get bigger eggs and a better colour than they've lately been giving?"

The farm is the best place for the child to learn the ways of Nature without precocious thoughts. Phillis was used to the plain statements of old Betsy. They left her without a blush on her young cheek or another thought beyond cows and pigs.

On her way back from her chicken farm she drove to the telegraph office in Beltonville and sent a message to Hassan, reminding him that he had promised to run down for a short week-end that week.

(3)

Hassan needed no spur to bring him to his love. Her proposition that they should be married had taken him completely by surprise. On his own initiative he would not have dared to ask her. But since the relations between them had changed he had let himself go and had fallen deeply in love with the English girl. Indians are not in the habit of "walking out" and philandering with girls. Familiarities begin with marriage, from which there is no retreat. To be allowed to touch Phillis and take her hand, to receive a kiss now and then—even if it was on her part more of a sisterly nature than the warm kiss of a lover—fired him with an emotion that was new and upsetting. He wanted to be married at once. But this he knew to be impossible. He must wait, much as he disliked the restraint.

He was well aware of all that his father had planned for his future. So far he had acquiesced without objection. It was strictly in accordance with the conservative rule of Moslem life. A man was allowed to have more than one wife. Race did not matter. As long as the wife was a Muhammadan and was ready to conform to the customs and rules of conduct laid down for her in the Koran, she was received into the family without objection.

The Moslems make good sons and worthy fathers. The sons obey without a word. The fathers receive their sons' wives and families under their roofs as a matter of course. A "family man," as a married Mussulman calls himself, has

no wish to see his son leave the old home and set up in another house. As long as the father is alive the son's home is with him.

This arrangement does not mean that the young man is not to travel, or lodge in other towns. Business, his father's or his own, may call him away from home. He leaves his wife and family with his parents, secure in the knowledge that they will be safe and well cared for during his absence.

Even though Hassan had left his home at the early age of nine years, he had not come away in ignorance. He had seen his two brothers married and settled in the Palace Agent's rabbit-warren of a house in Hyderabad. He was aware that when the time came he too would be given a suite of rooms and a wife, before he took up the appointment as an assistant in the Hyderabad branch of the Europe Stores. If it had not been for the European War, which dislocated commercial plans in every civilized country, he would have returned long ago to India and been established in his native city, holding the recognized position of a married man.

He had reconciled himself to the deferring of his father's plans for his future and had been content to wait till Allah should see fit to allow of human designs to be fulfilled.

At last the call came for which he had been waiting so long. The Palace Agent, as we have seen, summoned his son home. Hassan, with the ready obedience of his race, began at once to make his preparations for complying with what virtually amounted to an order.

Phil's proposal of marriage had not interfered with these preparations in any way. She did not ask him to disobey her parent's command. Nor did she insist that he should stay in England. She repeated her intention of marrying him at a registry office and of going out to India with him. It might delay his departure a few weeks, but this, she said, did not matter. He could easily arrange with headquarters in England to have the appointment his father was so anxious for him to secure in Hyderabad kept open for him.

She was confident that everything, as she planned it, would run evenly. She assured Hassan that he need not trouble himself about any opposition. On her own side, she pointed out, her family had taken the proposed marriage like lambs. As to what Joan and her husband would say, it mattered to nobody. In all probability they would be against rather than for the alliance. She reminded herself that she must ask

Joan, next time she wrote, whether the Sahib ranked among the Hyderabad nobles and had any title other than what they called him.

As lovers, Hassan and Phil had not been together much. By this time Hassan was a busy man. His special work demanded his presence in town. Sometimes he was away on his commercial travels under the wing of a buyer. His was no idle billet; the firm was making him a useful member of their establishment, as much for their own benefit as for that of the young man.

Phil's many occupations kept her busy, leaving no time to brood over the future. The moments she could spare from the farmyard were spent in choosing her trousseau and providing herself with a suitable outfit for the tropics. This resulted in a long list of questions for Joan to answer.

Hassan arrived by the afternoon train from London. Phil was at the station to meet him with her car.

"Hello, darling!" she cried breezily. "So glad you got off in time to catch the train."

"They are very good to me at the office. It is splendid having an old friend like Mr. Murray at headquarters."

"Has he left India for good?"

"I think so. He hopes not to have to return."

"Have you told him about our engagement?"

"No, I thought it best to say nothing at present. It is entirely a private affair between you and myself."

He turned in his seat and let his eyes rest upon her fair face. He had arrived at the age of twenty-four, while she was only seventeen. He had lost all his boyish figure and had filled out into a fine, broad man. The English climate in which he had spent his youth had left its mark upon him.

"Just as well. I dare say that there will be a few snags in the way when we come to the real business, but I don't care. I mean to carry it through."

"I hope that no trouble has cropped up since I saw you?"

"Nothing so far that matters in my opinion. I'll tell you the latest development when we get back. I can't talk while I am driving. I shall have you and the old bus in the ditch down this lane. I must ask Uncle Dick to have it mended. His heavy old carts cut it up and make such awful ruts."

Hassan kept silent or only made a trivial remark now and then, till she swung out of the lane into the long drive that

took them to the house. Phil drove the car round to the garage, leaving Aunt Olive to welcome the guest.

Phil had asked as a favour that nothing should be said of the cable until she had spoken to Hassan.

Aunt Olive had no wish to interfere. She was a little apprehensive as to the manner in which Hassan might take the accusation that he was a married man who was contemplating marrying a second wife while the first was still living.

She glanced at Hassan as he greeted her. She could not help feeling admiration for the fine-looking man into which he had grown. He possessed the regular features of the Arab race, the firm chin, and shapely lips that were habitually closed. He was always a silent boy. This characteristic had never left him. Now it had become a habit which was serving him well in his profession.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

(I)

AUNT OLIVE led her visitor to the drawing-room. The room was long in shape and panelled, the windows reaching down to the floor. The sashes drew up sufficiently high to allow anyone to step over the low sill and out on to the lawn. The lawn was a perfect bit of turf. It had taken some two hundred years to bring to its present condition. Although the head gardener was proud in a way of its perfection, he grudged the time spent in rolling and cutting the grass.

"That there lawn that Miss Olive set so much store by, I could grow half an acre of cabbages in the time I hev to spend over it."

Circling round the lawn was a gravel path that seemed always crying out for the roller. Lastly came a belt of shrubbery that protected everything from the rough winds of the East Coast. Under the walls of the house were borders already yellow and brown with wallflowers and daffodils.

After Hassan had greeted Aunt Olive with the Oriental courtesy that was one of his charms, Phillis took his arm and led him out into the garden. They crossed the turf and made for a sheltered seat, its back towards the high wall that separated the flowers from the vegetables. She avoided his outstretched arm in her haste to reach the seat. As he seated himself by her side he said:

"Aren't you going to give me a kiss?"

He was just a little afraid of his adored one.

"Yes, old dear, when you have explained one or two things."

"Do you want me to tell you that I love you more each day that passes, beautiful rose of my heart!"

Phil had no use for flattery or compliments, or to be called by extravagant names. She took the cable out of her vanity bag and thrust it at him abruptly with a peremptory request that he would read it.

"I want you to explain its meaning if you can."

His eyes passed slowly over the words two or three times.

"It comes from my brother-in-law and was sent to Uncle Dick. You and I are the only people who are talking of getting married. Presumably it refers to you."

Still he did not speak. He returned the slip of paper to her, and she replaced it in her bag. His silence perplexed her. She suddenly felt impatient.

"Well?" she cried at last. "Have you a wife in India?"

"No, not from my point of view."

"Nor from mine, I hope," she rejoined quickly. "Will you tell me from whose point of view you are possessed of a wife?"

"From my father's."

His reply took her aback.

"He must be crazy. How can you be married?"

"While I have been in England he has made what he calls a marriage contract for me with a girl of about your age."

With a curious little stab of sudden jealousy she said:

"What's she like?"

"How can I tell? I have never seen her."

"When are you going to see her?"

"When I return home."

"And supposing that I am already your wife and with you, what then?"

He did not reply. A smile of something like scorn appeared on Phil's lips as she continued.

"Your father couldn't take you away from me and marry you against your will to another woman, could he? Could he?" she repeated hotly.

"If you were on the spot to protest in person I suppose he would not do such a thing. He is not given to violence."

"He couldn't separate us by force?"

"He is too kind-hearted for that. But he would be frightfully vexed and unhappy. It would shame him in the eyes of the girl's relatives with whom he is making the contract."

Phillis was silent. Her active mind was busy already with plans for the defeat of the Sahib's schemes. Hassan was disturbed by her mood and still more troubled over the cable. It was of the nature of a bolt from the blue. He wanted to disperse all serious thoughts and enjoy the pleasures of the moment. In less than twenty-four hours he would be returning to London to work.

He took her hand and lifted it to his lips. Her thoughts

of the cable were abruptly scattered by the sight of a diamond ring which sparkled as the rays of the setting sun caught the gem. He pushed it over her third finger and again pressed his lips to her hand.

"Oh, Hassan! You shouldn't have spent your money like this. What a beautiful ring!"

She gave him the kiss for which he was craving, but he had not succeeded in diverting her mind from the cable and its cryptic message. He had not solved the mystery. She disengaged herself from his embracing arm and turned to face him.

"Listen, Hassan! I must have an honest and clear explanation of this cable. The aunt and the uncles demand it, and we shall have no peace till they are satisfied."

He saw that it was necessary to face the question and that she would not be put off with love-making. He dropped her hand and sat up at attention. His task was not going to be easy. How could he make these simple country folk comprehend the intricate laws that governed matrimonial affairs in the Moslem world?

"The explanation is quite simple," he said—was it, indeed? —"If my father were an Englishman his action would amount to a betrothal. But when a matrimonial engagement, a contract he would call it, is made in India, it is given the name of a marriage."

"If that is so you are only engaged. There is nothing binding on either side in an engagement. It can be broken off without any difficulty."

He did not reply. Better to let her arrive at her own conclusions, whether they were right or wrong.

"As you haven't even met her and don't know what she is like, there are no shattered hearts to consider on either side. She or her people may possibly sue you for breach of promise, but in that case it would only be a business matter. Your father, since he entered into the contract, and not you, would be responsible for the costs."

Phil spoke with the confidence of youth as though she had the law at her fingers' ends.

"We don't have breach of promise cases in India," replied Hassan.

"You will have in this case, my dear!"

"What are you proposing that we should do, Phil?" he asked.

He gazed at her with anxiety. He was beginning to realize that not only had she the reins in her hands but that she intended to go her own way. He was to follow.

"When does your father expect you to arrive at Hyderabad?"

"As soon as I can pack up and get away."

"You can't be hustled and leave the country as if you were a criminal. There are several things to be done before you go. First and foremost, we must be married, instead of waiting six months as I proposed at first, and we go out to India together. Do you understand?"

"What about your uncles and aunt?"

"They will be told nothing, nothing at all until we have carried out our plans."

"Where shall we be married?"

"At the registry office of the district in which you are living. As soon as you get back to town you must go to the office and make inquiries. You may put me down as eighteen. I am in my eighteenth year. If they want to see me at the registry office, I'll come up for the day any time you like to fix. You can meet me at Liverpool Street Station. It will all be as easy as kissing your hand. But you mustn't say a word at present to these three old dears down here. They will be terrified."

"Won't their consent be necessary?"

"Not if I am of age to be married. We are both of age, as far as I know, and we can do as we like."

"But not as regards your money."

"Oh, bother the money! It's the wedding I'm thinking of," replied Phil, in the splendid ignorance of youth.

"Couldn't we have a little time to ourselves before we start for India?" asked the impatient lover.

"I think not," pronounced Phil. "Uncle Dick might hunt up some hideous way of separating us till you have shaken yourself free of this unseen hussy, who calls herself your wife. Impudence! It is too great a risk, old dear."

"My father will ask me to come home first and let me come back for you later."

"Quite likely, but you mustn't consent to anything of the kind. You would be kidnapped and forced into a marriage with this designing girl before you knew what was happening to you. I must be there to protect you and stick up for my rights. If you went to India without me it would be the end

of all things. Once they had possession of you there would be small hopes for the absent one. You would be theirs for keeps."

She looked at the handsome young Oriental at her side. She firmly believed that he only required the support and encouragement of a friend to make him find his feet and stand alone without constant parental guidance. It was time that he relied on his own judgment and acted for himself.

Although he had read the cable with apparent calm, he was far from feeling happy in his mind. He might possibly succeed in explaining the situation to the girl by his side, but he doubted if he could do so to the older members of her family. Already qualms and doubts were arising in his mind. He had listened uneasily to her plans for taking the law into her own hands.

Hassan knew his father. Phillis had yet to learn what an inexorable tower of strength the Sahib could be when he set his mind on any particular course of action.

She was strong-willed, courageous to recklessness, and she was accustomed to have her own way. Her will had never been seriously crossed. But she was inexperienced.

When it came to a difference of opinion between the subtle man of the East and the simple-minded girl of the West, it might be the Muhammadan who would win.

(2)

"Now come and talk to Aunt Olive. We will tackle her first," said Phillis as she sprang to her feet.

They returned to the drawing-room where Olive sat by a bright wood fire, surrounded with vases of daffodils and early hyacinths. The room like the occupant was of the old world. The housemaid was unable to run her duster over the polished surface of tables and shelves. Early-Victorian treasures, like fallen leaves in autumn, covered every available space. It was nothing, however, for the maid to worry about. Aunt Olive dusted her family treasures and allowed no one else to touch them. She glanced up at Phil and her companion with a welcoming smile as they entered the room.

"Hassan is going to explain everything," announced Phil, confidently. "See, Auntie, what he has given me!"

She displayed her ring, turning it so that it caught the light.

No girl is indifferent to the lure of pearls and diamonds, their beauty and their value.

Living in the country and entirely occupied with country pursuits, mostly of an outdoor nature, Phillis had no great love for jewellery. Half a dozen gold safety-pins worn for use rather than ornament were all that she wanted. This gift with its associations and all it stood for was different from other ornaments. It pleased her and softened her towards Hassan. In her gratitude her kiss had been perhaps a trifle more affectionate than usual. But even so he had missed the response to the warmth that tingled in his own veins, as her unpainted lips were pressed to his. He saw no sign of a devotion such as thrilled through him at her presence, her touch, her intimate words.

He supposed that she was only exhibiting what might usually be expected from an English girl by her lover. She was taught to be self-controlled. The expression of passionate, unrestrained love would come later when she was his wife. Then she would give him full measure and satisfy the ardent desires that were taking possession of him.

Aunt Olive laid aside her needlework that she might give them her full attention. Truth to say, she was full of curiosity and wondered in her innocent soul if there was a romance behind it with just a touch of tragedy that would rouse all her sympathy. The romance of her girlhood's heart had not left her in her middle age.

The young couple settled themselves in chairs on the other side of the hearth. Hassan held out his hands to the flames as though enjoying the warmth. East Anglia, in his opinion, was a cold place at the best of times. It was Aunt Olive who was the first to speak.

"Well, my dears! I am afraid that you have not had too pleasant a time. Have you discussed Lawrence's extraordinary cable?"

"We haven't made a mountain out of a molehill," said Phil quickly.

"Which means, I hope, that Hassan has been able to explain it satisfactorily."

"It is altogether wrong to accuse Hassan of having a wife. I can't think what Lawrence is thinking of to bring such a charge against him," said Phil.

"Lawrence would not make such a statement without some foundation for it," replied Aunt Olive quietly.

"His only grounds for such a statement is the fact that Hassan's father has been making arrangements for his marriage to some girl in Hyderabad, a girl Hassan has never seen. The Sahib claims it to be a marriage."

"What a queer way of marrying," commented Aunt Olive. She turned to Hassan, who had been sitting silently listening to the voluble Phil. "Do you mean to say that you can be married——"

"I'm not married, Mrs. Oakley," he interrupted.

She finished what she had to say. "—that you are in course of being married in your absence to a woman you have not chosen for yourself and whom you have never seen?"

"It is our custom," he replied.

"You understand, Auntie, Hassan is only engaged. We should call it that if it took place in England," said Phillis. "It is the parents who are carrying on in this ridiculous fashion. I tell Hassan that it must be stopped, that they can't possibly marry him to just anyone without his consent."

"Can it be stopped?" asked Olive.

Phil gave Hassan no opportunity of answering her question.

"Of course it can!" she cried, excitedly. "And what is more, it is going to be stopped."

Mrs. Oakley was not convinced.

"I should like to hear what more Lawrence has to say on the subject. What authority he has for saying that Hassan has a wife."

"The letters will explain," said Hassan, who so far had been rather silent.

"I am sure I hope that they will," responded Mrs. Oakley. "Meanwhile, how do you consider that you stand, both of you?"

Her eyes were upon the man as though she looked for an answer from him. But Phil gave him no chance of speaking, and once more he allowed her to take the lead.

"We are engaged to be married," protested Phil. "And we see no cause to break it off. Do we, Hassan?"

He did not answer. Mrs. Oakley pressed him and repeated her question, addressing herself to Hassan pointedly.

"There is my father to consider," he said, which was no answer.

Again Phil rushed in impetuously, but as she opened her

lips to speak, Aunt Olive lifted her hand and checked her. The older woman continued:

"If your father orders you to break off your engagement with my niece and complete the other marriage, are you prepared to disobey?"

He did not reply immediately, but again hesitated, a hesitation which Phil resented. She took up the cudgels again and answered for him. He accepted her championship without a word.

"Of course he would not consent, any more than I should consent if you and Uncle Dick were trying to marry me against my will to Jim Armstrong."

Aunt Olive wished with all her heart that it was Jim.

"You had better both go and see Uncle Dick. He is as anxious as I am to know what the cable means."

Phil was on her feet in a moment. Her aunt stopped her.

"And, Phil, my dear, do let Hassan speak for himself. He must answer, not you, any questions your uncle has to ask."

"All right, I'll be mum as long as it's only Hassan's business. But where I come in I mean to have my say."

"—And your way," added Mrs. Oakley, with half a sigh and half a smile. She did not like Hassan's silence. It would have pleased her better if the tables had been turned and if he had been the one to hasten to explain.

The two lovers went to the sitting-room occupied by Belton. It was known as the gun-room. Here Belton sat in his father's old easy chair. From the window opening into the large courtyard, he interviewed men who wanted to see him on business, and paid his employees. There was a second easy chair, well worn by long use. It had been Clement's. Oakley occupied it now, and Dick was thankful to have his company.

Oakley had his office in Beltonville where he kept all his ledgers and where his clerk lived in rooms over the office.

Uncle Dick was reading the evening paper. As Phil and her companion entered he put it down and took off his glasses. He knew upon what errand they had come. Oakley, who had a book in his hand, rose from his chair.

"Shall I go?" he asked.

"No, sit ye down again, Harry. I can guess what these young people have come about. It's this cable. The business concerns you as much as it does me. You're Phil's other guardian. She must have our consent to her marriage, yours

and mine, and we shall not give it unless we are satisfied that everything is straight and in order."

"There's your cable, Uncle Dick," said Phil, laying the envelope on the table before him.

"Well? What has Hassan got to say? Where is this wife of his?"

His keen eyes rested on the young man, who, as in the drawing-room, was not too ready with words.

"He hasn't got a wife," said Phil, without giving Hassan a chance of offering an explanation. "He is only engaged, and not that with his own consent. His father has done the engaging for him. So far he hasn't set eyes on the girl—doesn't even know her name, her age, nor what she is like."

Uncle Dick turned to Hassan, ignoring Phil's torrent of speech.

"Your father is arranging this marriage for you, I understand?"

"Yes, sir. It's the custom of our country."

"And how far is your father's action binding on yourself?"

Hassan was not ready with his answer and Phil broke in again.

"Uncle Dick!" she protested. "What a question to ask! Can any man in the world be married against his will to a girl he has never seen?"

"It's impossible to say what strange things they do on the other side of the earth."

The old yeoman's eyes still rested on the man who had come from the other side of the earth, as he called it.

"It's like this, Uncle Dick—" began Phillis, once more jumping into the breach.

"My dear!" he protested, lifting his hand. "Do give Hassan a chance of explaining the cable."

He drew the slip out of the envelope and slowly read the message.

Marriage impossible wife in India.

"Why is your marriage to my niece impossible?"

"It is impossible from my father's point of view because I have not asked his consent," replied Hassan.

"But—but—" began Phillis.

"One moment, my dear. Let me speak. Hassan, have you a wife in India?"

"My father would tell you that I have. With my people as soon as the preliminaries of the marriage contract are concluded, the marriage is considered made. The final ceremony takes place immediately before the marriage is consummated."

"Have you the power to repudiate the contract in which so far you have taken no part?"

"I don't know what my position is. I have never heard of a son repudiating a contract made on his behalf by his father or his guardian," replied Hassan straightforwardly.

"You know, of course, that Phil is dependent on Mr. Oakley and myself, who are her guardians, for her allowance. We have power to stop it at our discretion. She does not inherit her father's money until she is twenty-one."

"I have enough to keep my wife in comfort wherever we settle," replied Hassan. "My father has been very liberal in the matter of an allowance. He has given me more than enough for my needs and I have been able to make some good investments. I have not done badly," he added, with a touch of pride that he could not hide.

Belton regarded them both in perplexity. He knew his niece's temperament. She inherited her obstinacy from her father. Godfrey had disregarded old Benjamin's wishes and had taken his own line with regard to the publican's daughter. Phillis was quite capable of following her own bent with the same reckless wilfulness.

Oakley was a man of peace. While he had sat silently listening he had been revolving matters in his own mind. He would deeply regret if anything happened to upset his wife, the gentle Aunt Olive, who had been like a mother to the girl, and to disturb the even atmosphere of the Hall.

"May I say a word, Dick?" he asked, when a pause occurred.

"By all means do so. You have as much right to speak as I have. If you can see a way out of the mess, let's have it."

"It seems that the true meaning of the cable can't be properly explained by Hassan to our satisfaction. It is capable of two constructions. Ours does not tally with his and Phil's. We must wait for the letters that will clear up the mystery."

Belton nodded his head in assent and Oakley went on:

"Until we have something more explicit to go upon, I think

we are justified in leaving things as they are. If on the receipt of the Indian mail Hassan can satisfy us that he is a single man and free from all ties that would be considered obstacles to a union in England, or in India—it must hold good in both countries—his engagement to Phil may continue with her consent. There is no reason why she should not marry the man of her choice. It wouldn't be every woman's choice in this country. We know that there is a strong prejudice against mixed marriages among English-born people. Apparently Phil doesn't share it."

Phil in her excitement was on her feet at once.

"Uncle Harry! You are splendid!" she cried.

She turned to Hassan, who was, if anything, depressed rather than exhilarated. He remained seated, otherwise she would have caught him in her arms and danced him round the room.

"You hear that, Hassan! It means that our engagement stands. It stands! Doesn't it, Uncle Harry?"

"It stands until the Indian mail comes in with letters from Lawrence and Joan explaining more fully what the cable means. We shall then, your Uncle Dick and I, reconsider the whole question. Unless we are satisfied that everything is regular and in order, you must not look for our consent."

Phil did not trouble her head over any such contingencies. She believed that Hassan would make the way clear and that all difficulties would vanish.

"How soon will the letters be here?"

"In sixteen or seventeen days from the dispatch of the cable," said Oakley.

"You have nearly three weeks to live in your fool's paradise," remarked Uncle Dick.

But Phil paid no attention to her uncle's warning. By this time she was quite satisfied that her world was running smoothly enough, and nothing could spoil the future she had mapped out for herself and her lover.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

(I)

THE letters arrived. Phil seized hers and retired to her room, which she had furnished as a bed-sitting-room. She sat down at her desk and, untroubled by doubt or mis-giving, opened her letter. It was from Joan.

She read it through, turned to the beginning again and re-read it more slowly. As she came to the end a second time, she planked it down on the desk with a thump. It was the first breath of the coming storm.

"Hassan is a liar!" she said between her teeth. "To all intents and purposes he's got a wife in India, or will have, as soon as he sets foot in the country. And then where do I come in?" A pause ensued. "Joan says I shall be second. Second!" she repeated scornfully. "No, indeed! Not if I know it! And the conditions of our marriage? I must become a Muhammadan! No, thank you! I don't think!"

She jumped up and paced the room.

"Not if I know it!" she repeated, more than once. "Not if I know it!"

She stood at her desk with clenched fists uplifted and brought them down with sufficient force to leave them bruised.

"The cheek! The infernal cheek of it," she cried, using an expression she had often heard on her uncles' lips. "The insolence of believing that I would take up with their rotten old back-number of a religion and be a meek and humble wife, a number two, if you please! And, according to Joan, if I married Hassan to-morrow, I should still be number two as soon as I reached India. And I should have to sit down in Joan's house and wait till he had completed his ridiculous marriage with the hussy his father has chosen, who is to be number one!"

Her rage increased as she more fully realized the true condition of things. She could no longer sit or stand still. She had a trick from childhood of dancing in her emotional storms. Old Betsy called it "prancing." She used to say: "That's right, little miss, prance it off and you'll feel better."

Phil was "prancing it off" now, but she was not feeling better. She must talk to somebody and get rid of her bursting indignation.

She snatched up her sister's letter and ran to the morning-room where Aunt Olive was to be found. That gentle-hearted lady had also received a letter from Joan. She, too, had read the missive twice and had comprehended the difficulties with which they were all faced. Aunt Olive, in the softness of her heart, was wiping her eyes as she contemplated Phil's disappointment.

"My darling Phillis!" she cried, as her niece entered the room. "Joan has sent a full explanation of the cable that puzzled us. There was a letter to your uncle from Lawrence which I sent to the gun-room. It probably says the same as this. You may read what Joan says, if you like."

"No need to read it. Mine tells the same tale. No doubt Lawrence repeats it to Uncle Dick."

"What are we to do?"

"I know what I shall do if Hassan dares to show his face here. I shall thrash him with my riding-whip. I'll teach him which is going to be wife and which—which concubine, for that's what the family proposes to make of me. Nothing more nor less!"

"My dear child, it's of no use to be violent."

Phil had begun to prance again and threaten Hassan with every punishment under the sun.

"He had better look out for himself. I am going to be violent!"

"Don't forget that it was you who proposed marriage. We must be fair to Hassan. I don't believe he would ever have dared to ask you to be his wife unless you had led him on. He must know the Koran and its teaching. He must be aware of what Joan puts so plainly in her letter. His father, she says, has kept him informed of all that has been done."

"Then it is simply colossal cheek on Hassan's part, and his father's, asking me to become a Muhammadan!"

"Perhaps he was under the impression that you have known the conditions all along. Your marriage wouldn't be legal in the eyes of the Moslem world unless you became one of them."

Mrs. Oakley rose to her feet, laying down the never-ending mending with which every spare moment of her time was occupied.

"I am going to see your uncle. I have given him time to read Lawrence's letter. He is in the gun-room. I don't think he has gone out yet. Would you like to come and hear what he has to say?"

"No, thanks! I know what it would be. 'I told you so.' I should want to strangle him on the spot."

"He ought to read what Joan says in her letters."

Phillis tossed her sister's letter to her aunt.

"By all means, let him see everything. But he need not be anxious any longer. Tell him so from me. I shall have nothing more to do with the wretch. Hassan had better keep out of my sight if he doesn't want to be run into the pigsty by the scruff of his neck. I am quite capable of doing it!"

She looked like it as she step-danced from one foot to the other.

"Then the engagement is off?"

"Off! I should rather think it was!" shouted Phil, regardless of being heard by the maids who were busy cleaning and dusting.

"Have you had a letter from Hassan?"

"No, and he will be wise if he doesn't write. Oh, the cheek, the insolence of it. Me! *Me!* A Muhammadan and second wife to—to——!"

Words failed her. Aunt Olive was of the opinion that her niece would recover herself best if left alone.

Dick was in the gun-room on the point of starting out on his morning round. He had taken up the long ash-stick which he usually carried. His car would carry him to the fields over which he wanted to cast his eye, but it would not cross the ploughed land. If he desired to leave the road, his steady old cob awaited him to save his stiffening legs. This morning even the cob was of no use. He would have to walk the cross-country journey he proposed to make.

"One minute before you go out, Dick," said Olive, as she entered the room.

"As many as you like, my dear."

He could guess her errand. He removed his hat, replaced his ash-plant in its corner and sat down to hear what she had to say.

"Here are letters from Joan. You will know what they are about, as you have heard from Lawrence."

"Yes," he said slowly. "He writes very plainly. He was quite justified in sending us the cable, although Phil hasn't

hitherto acted upon it. She will have to do something now. From what Lawrence says, the engagement must come to an end, for which I am truly thankful. The man is not in a position to take an English wife. Lawrence speaks very highly of Hassan's father, says he has behaved like a gentleman."

"In what way?" asked Olive.

"In consenting to Hassan's marriage with Phil if she will comply with the necessary conditions required by Muhammadan law. Joan has probably made the conditions plain to Phil as Lawrence has done to me."

"Quite plain, I gather, judging from the rage she is in."

He smiled. He knew his niece in all her moods.

"What does she propose to do?" he asked.

"Lay violent hands on Hassan if he dares to show up."

"Poor child! And she is only seventeen, too young to have much of a broken heart at that age."

"Anyway, the engagement is at an end for good and all."

"So much the better. Harry will be just as glad as we are that it has been broken off. He was afraid she would do something desperate, but if she is angry with the man, all danger of that is over."

He resumed his hat and took up his stick again. The fields that were being prepared for the sowing of the winter root crops were of more importance than the sorrows of an unwise maiden over a lost lover. He departed on his morning round easier in his mind than he had been for some time past.

(2)

Phillis retired to her room. She had fed her fowls before breakfast and gathered in the new-laid eggs. There were six dozen of them, counting yesterday's harvest. All were due to be delivered that very morning to the dairy in Beltonville, where the home farm produce was retailed. Betsy was ready with her quota of fresh butter and cream. It was Phil's job to carry these in her car to the shop. The gardener had brought in a hundred bundles of asparagus and some fat pink sticks of rhubarb, intended for sale.

She had recovered herself to a certain extent. It was no use, she reflected, sitting down and getting mad over Hassan's duplicity. When she came back from distributing the Hall produce, she would give Master Hassan a bit of her mind, and

let him know how she felt about his father's offer that as a Muhammadan and second wife she might be admitted into the family. Every time she thought of the situation and his proposed conditions the blood rushed into her soft round cheeks still bearing the untouched bloom of her 'teens, and she fired some word of abuse at her lover. Preposterous! Insolent! Poisonous! Unheard-of cheek! It formed a kind of chant to the chug-chug of her car.

She pulled up with a grinding of brakes at the shop with its title *The Hall Estate Dairy* over the door. Mrs. Merton and her daughter came out at once.

"Miss Phillis! How you do drive! You'll kill yourself one of these days, or my name ain't Martha Merton!"

"I'm all right, old dear! Don't you worry. One day I'll drive you to Yarmouth fair. You'll get there as easy as sliding down into the lower regions."

"Not me, Miss Phil! I wouldn't ride in that there steam engine of yars, no, not if you paid me!"

"You should smoke a cigarette to quiet your nerves, like me," said Phil.

"How you do talk! Don't you hev' nothing to do with them there little twists of tobacco. They'll make you as sick as a dorg!"

"Here, take the rest of the asparagus. The gardener says that he is not going to cut it much longer. This is May. He must stop cutting before the end of the month, or it will weaken the beds for next spring."

Phil started the car, nearly ran into a hand-cart distributing groceries, and just missed the doctor's car. He was the only individual who drove faster than she did. The urgency of his calls he considered justified his pace. In Phil's case there was no justification for imperilling the lives of inoffensive villagers.

From the shop she headed straight for the post office. She went to the telegraph counter and dispatched a wire to Hassan.

Your number is up. No need to call again.

This done, she felt better. The reaction was beginning to set in. The desire to prance and hit something with her clenched fists was leaving her. She decided to take a run along the Yarmouth road. It followed the line of the cliff, dipping into little valleys here and there and climbing high

above the trim hedges and rich fields that descended towards the sandy shore. She had a fine view of the drab North Sea, with its gleams and streaks of grey and silvery light.

To-day Phil saw nothing of the beauty of sea and sky. Presently her sight was unexpectedly dimmed. She was not given to tears and was surprised to find them slowly brimming over on to her cheeks.

"Fool! Idiot that I am! He isn't worth an addled egg and I'm not going to weep over him."

She drew out her handkerchief and mopped her eyes severely. She had the road to herself. Few people passed along it at that time in the morning. Later a traveller or two from the distant villages might be going that way, bent on shopping in Beltonville. In five minutes' time she had recovered herself. She put her handkerchief away and gripped the steering-wheel once more.

"Now, Phillis, my dear," she said to herself. "That's enough of the sobstuff. Buck up and get on with your jobs."

She turned the car and, taking advantage of the empty road, reached home in good time for lunch.

Three pairs of kindly eyes glanced sympathetically at her as she took her seat. Her elders wisely said nothing. Uncle Dick and Oakley began a discussion about one of the larger houses in Beltonville. It was one of the first that had been built, and was too big to suit the people who came down to the sea to live on the sands with a tent for their protection. Harry suggested that it should be turned into flats. He could get it ready, he said, by July when the season began.

"Furnished plainly with plenty of beds and pegs to hang clothes upon, I think flats would let sooner than the old-fashioned lodgings."

"We had better set about it at once," replied Uncle Dick, who never interfered with the estate agency affairs. "What about the cooking?"

"They're a picnic crowd and don't want hot dinners in the house. We will give each flat a little stove and sink where they can cook their bacon and eggs and wash up——"

Under cover of this conversation which was full of interest for the two men, Aunt Olive asked a question that was troubling her.

"Phil, do you think that Hassan will turn up after your—your change of plan?"

"Not he!" the other snorted.

"He's not the sort of man to take a matter that concerns his own happiness easily. He must have something to say on the subject, and he ought in common fairness to be given a hearing."

"I don't think he will venture to say anything to me."

"But why not?"

"I sent him a wire this morning to warn him to keep off the grass."

"Isn't that rather unkind of you, since you yourself——?"

Phil interrupted her. She had heard enough about having proposed to Hassan herself.

"Unkind!" she repeated. "He must know by this time that bigamy lands one in a mess."

"Bigamy!" repeated Aunt Olive.

"Well? What else is it when he contemplates introducing me to his father as wife number two?"

The men had finished their dinner and their conversation. They never sat long after having eaten their food. The family party of four dispersed as usual and went their various ways.

That very afternoon Phil poured out her indignation on paper in a letter to Hassan. The closely-written sheets went no farther than the wastepaper-basket.

"He isn't worth it!" she cried. "He isn't worth the paper and ink I am wasting on him."

She tore the sheets in shreds and threw down her pen. Then she went to her fowls, where she found distraction from her thoughts. She fed them, counted her turkeys, gave Crib her dog a cuff over the head for chasing a cock, the veteran of the barndoor fowls, and felt distinctly better.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

(1)

HASSAN, watching for the arrival of every post, was disappointed at Phil's silence. Then he received the telegram. This definitely warned him that he need not call again. If this had not come, he would have taken the express to Yarmouth and presented himself at the Hall.

He understood the slang expression about "his number being up." Although by race a fatalist, Hassan was like his father in many respects. He possessed a strong liking for his own way, and refused to accept Phil's mandate that his number was up. He believed still that he could persuade her to become his wife, if only he could convince her that the Muhammadan marriage was not like the English ceremony.

The Palace Agent qualified a blind belief in Allah by acting in accordance with the old tag that often supplemented the counsel, "Trust in Allah," by adding, "But tie up the camel."

Adam-u-din put his trust where it should be, but he invariably followed a policy embodied in the advice to tie up the camel, when the opportunity was given. He had led the life of a good Mussulman, read his Koran regularly and had never neglected his prayers. But when he desired a certain end, he did not sit down and wait for it. He set his wits to work—and they were long and strong—to bring about the fulfilment of his desires.

Hassan had received a letter from his father in which the Palace Agent set forth very clearly all that he hoped to accomplish for his son and the exact course Hassan was to pursue.

The appointment promised in the Hyderabad Branch of the Europe Stores would be ready for him to take up as soon as he could join the staff. There were others, Englishmen, who would be glad to step into it if Hassan neglected to take advantage of the offer. It would be advisable that there should be no delay.

He repeated his request that Hassan should come out to India at once. The marriage ceremonies had been carried on as far as was possible. He was anxious to complete them and give his daughter-in-law her proper position in the harem.

There were mail steamers leaving England once a week. A few days would suffice for Hassan to gather together his personal luggage and to pack up.

The Sahib went into dates and calculated accurately that his son could be with them in June. He would expect him then. He ended with an appeal to Hassan to keep faith, and fall in with his arrangements to the best of his ability.

He then passed on to the question of Hassan's second marriage to an English wife. Nothing would give him greater pleasure, he assured his son, than to receive a child of his old friend, Mr. Godfrey Belton, as a daughter-in-law. He would look upon it as an honour and do all in his power to make her happy and comfortable in his house, where she would be given a suite of rooms suitable for her position. But this was a matter that must be considered after the first wife had been received into the family and established in the position to which she would have a right. He mentioned, incidentally, that it was not customary to take a second wife so soon after the first marriage, as Hassan seemed to wish; but all this could be adjusted on his arrival. After serving one or two years, the Company would give him three months' leave, when Hassan could return to England. Miss Phillis would be eighteen or nineteen. Provided she conformed to the conditions which would make her a true and legal wife in the eyes of the people of India among whom she would be living, the English marriage could take place before she changed her faith. He concluded his letter by reminding his son that a Muhammadan was expected to divide his time and attention equally between his wives.

Hassan finished reading his father's letter. His head dropped forlornly upon his hands as he sat at the writing-table in his bachelor rooms. The love that had sprung up in his heart was not a boy's passion. It had become absorbing and strong. He compared Phil with the women among whom he had grown up as a boy. The latter had no character. They were just a lot of silly sheep accepting the rule of the harem in meekness and humility. After Phil's vigorous personality they would prove colourless and unattractive.

It was time for him to go to the office. He locked the letter in a drawer and pulled himself together. On arrival the office-boy came up with a message asking him to go to the room where his chief sat.

"Hassan, I have had a letter from your father by the mail that has come in this morning. He wants you to go back to India at once. He asks me to speed up your departure by the next mail-boat. It is due to sail next Friday, six days hence. Rather short notice, but there is no difficulty in the way of your going. I am arranging for your passage at once. It's the slack season and the ship will not be crowded."

"Couldn't you make it a fortnight, sir, instead of six days?"

His chief looked at him with no encouragement in his expression. He had heard rumours of Hassan's engagement to an English girl somewhere in East Anglia, but he had asked no questions. It was not his business to interfere in the young man's private life. He could understand what this sudden summons home meant. It was a wise move on the part of his father to extricate him from any entanglement of the kind. He determined to do his best to help the Sahib in his design.

"I don't think it would be advisable to delay your departure," he said. "There is no need for it. Sahib Adam-u-din says that he is anxious you should secure the appointment at Hyderabad. If you do not take it up, it may possibly be given to another applicant. You have five or six days in which to say your farewells, quite sufficient considering that you are going home to your people. Have you any bills owing?"

"Only those for my lodgings, which I settle monthly."

"Good, bring them to me. Your father has sent a draft for a sum that will amply cover your passage-money and liabilities, and leave about forty pounds or more for pocket money and your petty travelling expenses."

Hassan turned away miserably. His father with all his plans had left him no loophole of escape. Phil's wire had closed the door as far as she was concerned. She, too, must have received letters as he had, and they appeared not to have pleased her. At the bottom of his heart he knew that he was not anxious to face her. He could imagine the rage she would be in, and he was uncertain against whom her wrath would be levelled. It would probably be himself.

He did his best to reconcile himself to circumstances which on all sides were against him. At the luncheon hour he went off to see his friend Jim Armstrong. From him he received comfort. Jim turned his thoughts to the preparations and offered to help him in sorting out the things he would require on the voyage and those which must be scrapped or packed in boxes to go as heavy luggage.

"I'll see to pushing your belongings through in the name of the Company. They will be quite safe under their care. Let's go to a theatre to-night and make the most of the little time you have."

(2)

It was twelve days after the arrival of the news which shattered the fool's paradise in which Phil had been living. She had recovered from her emotional storm. At her age love lets its victims with jars and jolts that are soon mended.

In spite of her lacerated feelings she was entirely absorbed in a new venture, the purchase of a flock of young goslings which she proposed to fatten for the Christmas market. She met with opposition from Betsy.

"Don't you hev' nothing to do with them there geese," the old woman counselled. She had been a successful henwife in her time. "They'll muck up the place for the turkeys and the guinea-fowls and the old hins. The hins on't lay if there's too much dirt and damp about. They goslings will make the pond that muddy, far worse than the ducks——"

"I've got room for them, Betsy. I might hurdle off a part of the meadow——"

"Yar middar ain't as big as a common. A common is the only place where geese did ought to be kept. That's too big for them to muck up and the rain pools give them as much water as is good for them. There's another thing about geese that hev' to be considered. When you come to selling them, you can't get the price that your turkeys will bring you. People with big families to feed find that a goose don't go half as far as a turkey. It's the legs what let you down, tough and not much on 'em."

Betsy's advice was always practicable and sound. Phil was in deep cogitation after she had left the dairy where she had been helping Betsy with the churn. The butter was a

little obstinate in "coming" that morning. The weather had turned cold for a spell and affected the cream. The parlour-maid came to say that a gentleman had called and wished to see her.

Her heart gave a sudden throb. Instantly she was on the defensive. It would take very little to turn that defensive into the offensive. Phil was nothing if she wasn't a fighter. She went swiftly towards the drawing-room, with the firm conviction that the caller was no other than Hassan. He had come to plead his cause with her. No! She would not allow herself to be overruled in her decision. He must understand clearly that everything between them was at an end. She would be firm. She would be adamant.

She burst into the room as hard-hearted and unforgiving as she could make herself.

It was not Hassan. Jim Armstrong stood before her, his hand held out in confident greeting.

"Jim!" she cried, with a gladness she did not attempt to hide. "This is first-rate seeing you here. You have come to stay the week-end? Aunt Olive will be delighted."

"I don't want to put you out with an uninvited guest—" he began.

"Uninvited! You're always welcome and you know it. We've got a bed for you whenever you like to turn up."

"I've taken a room at the hotel."

A sudden suspicion seized her. Hassan was probably with him and Jim had been sent on with the olive branch.

"Is Hassan with you at the hotel?" she asked quickly.

"He left by the last mail-boat. I saw him off myself. He sent you a message which I promised to give you in person."

"Bigamous wretch! I hate him! You know what he wanted to do?"

"He told me something of his difficulty."

"He wanted to marry me when he already had a wife in India! Think of it!" and she stamped her foot in anger.

"It was his father's doing and apparently he had no choice. Hassan is a good sort, one of the best. He asked me to say how sorry he was, and how unhappy."

"Of course, he would say that!"

"I am sure that it was true. He really looked miserable. You know, Phil, he was very much attached to you."

She was not in a forgiving mood.

"Oh, go to blazes with your whitewashing. You'll never make a blackamoor white. It is a relief to know that he has taken himself off and that I shall never see him again. You don't know how I have just missed getting into an awful mess."

Jim gazed at her with a new anxiety in his eye. He wondered what she had been doing in her recklessness.

"How was that?" he asked.

"Sit down and I will tell you."

She startled him with the relation of the plans she and Hassan had made to get married as soon as possible at the registry office in London. At the end of it he said:

"Oh, Phil! You really are rather mad."

He was very glad that the Indian was safely out of the country.

"Yes, I suppose I am," she admitted. "But I mean to go slow for the future"—she thought of those geese and Betsy's advice and decided not to buy them.

"Hassan asked me if I would collect a few of his things which he has left in his room here," said Jim presently.

"Come along. They are his old boating flannels that were sent to the wash after we came back from the broads."

"Shall you go to the broads again this summer?"

"To be sure, and you will come with us."

"Good, I shall enjoy it. I do hate London with all my heart. I wish I could find a job in the country and live out of doors."

"Ask Uncle Harry. He's the boy to do that. And, Jim, would you like to have this room?" They were in the bedroom hitherto appropriated solely to the use of Hassan. "It will always be ready for you and you can come down to the Hall whenever you like."

Hassan was fast fading from her young mind. It was a relief to know that he could not possibly turn up and reopen a subject which she would prefer to forget. The sting remained and would not go for some time to come, that he and his family had dared to believe that she would change her religion and marry a man who already had a wife.

"There's an hour and a half to lunch," she said, as they

finished putting Hassan's property together. "Come up to my chicken farm and see my flock of turkeys. I'll drive you there."

In ten minutes they were speeding along the lanes leading to the meadow at a break-neck pace, on an errand that absorbed the full attention of both.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

(I)

SAHIB ADAM-U-DIN went to Bombay to meet his son. It was just upon fifteen years since he had parted with him. Hassan was then a solemn little boy in an English suit of serge knickerbockers, which felt uncomfortable after the pyjamas and jacket to which he was accustomed. The Palace Agent recalled the child's solemn expression and stolid courage as he was setting out practically alone for a new and unknown world. What would he be like now?

The father waited on the landing-stage. He did not go on board the ship. He distinguished Hassan among the crowd of passengers at once.

Tall, handsome, with regular features and a refined face, the fine upstanding figure stood out in that gathering of men from the West. As the Sahib's eyes rested on his son a sudden thrill of pride passed through the heart of the Muhammadan.

Then as Hassan approached the gangway he caught sight of his father. He brought the palms of his hands together and bowed his head.

The young man was dressed like a European in a London suit of light tweed. His hair was cropped and his moustache cut in the latest fashion.

Adam-u-din extended both his hands.

"Allah's blessing be upon you, my beloved son," he said, in a voice which he found difficult to control.

"May the Prophet have you in his keeping!" responded the other.

The Palace Agent gave an order to his head peon who had come with him. It took but a few minutes for Hassan to point out his baggage. Father and son walked away slowly arm in arm towards the spot where the car waited.

They were going to one of the big hotels where the Sahib had engaged rooms. He had been in Bombay a week, having been charged with many commissions for his Highness the Nizam as well as business on behalf of the palace establishment. They were to leave that night by the mail train. A

special railway car would be ready for them in which they could travel through to their destination.

They reached the hotel and went to their private room where they could talk in comfort. Hassan had many questions to ask. Was his mother well? Was his sister Noora Bee happy with her husband? To these and many others the Sahib replied satisfactorily. He also spoke of the bride who was awaiting Hassan. She was as beautiful as a newly-opened jasmine blossom, as sweet as the waxen flower of the orange tree. She was——

Hassan moved restlessly at the mention of his bride. It was usual to speak extravagantly in praise of the unseen bride. He recalled the custom, having heard similar praise spoken of his brothers' brides. In those days he had believed every word that was said. To-day he received it with a grain of salt. He remained silent. His father fathomed his thoughts.

"I was sorry not to fall in with your wishes regarding Miss Phillis Belton," he said. "We had gone too far to be able to draw back and give her precedence."

"I am afraid according to her English notions she would not have consented to marry me if there was to be a second wife."

"The English are not like us. They are strictly monogamists. Their Bible teaches it. If four wives are necessary to our happiness and well-being, we are justified in taking them. How do matters stand between you and Phillis Belton?"

The voice in which this question was asked was quiet and casual, but it hid a depth of anxiety of which Hassan was in complete ignorance.

"The marriage is definitely broken off," Hassan replied dejectedly. "She dismissed me with reproaches that I did not deserve. Father! She was a wonderful girl. I loved her as I shall never love another."

The Sahib smiled. He laid his hand upon his son's shoulder.

"My son, wait and see, as the British Prime Minister said during the Great War," replied Adam-u-din. How relieved he was to hear his son's announcement he forbore to say, or even allow the unhappy young man to suspect. His policy of patience and gentle acquiescence had served its purpose. He had a shrewd suspicion that Joan and her husband would be equally gratified with the result of his diplomacy.

"If Phillis should change her mind, I shall be very glad to welcome her as a member of my family," he said by way of consoling the lover.

"She will never conform to what we should require of her," Hassan replied, refusing to be buoyed up with any false hopes. "Phil was one in a thousand, a woman for all time as a wife and a companion. We as a race don't produce such women."

"When you have had your experience of Muhammadan women you will be better able to give an opinion on the subject. Your mother has been wife and companion to me and a good deal more with her clear brain. The girl we have chosen for you is like your mother."

"I think you said in one of your letters that she had a Persian mother," said Hassan, not wishing to seem ungracious to a parent who was so manifestly trying to do the best to please his son.

"The girl is very fair, as is the case with most Persians whose blood is not mixed."

He left the implied question as to her birth unanswered.

"And she is the daughter of your younger brother. She is therefore my cousin."

"If you like to call her so," the Sahib replied with an indulgent smile. "She will prefer to be known as your wife, my son."

He went on to speak of the dates on which the concluding ceremony could be carried out and completed. He was allowing no grass to grow beneath his feet.

"You will not be able to take up your appointment at the Stores until this marriage business is at an end. I thought it as well to hurry on matters."

He then spoke of the astrologer who had been consulted, and of the guests who had been invited, the robes to be worn and the family jewels. These last only came out of their treasure chests on occasions like this.

He gave Hassan no opportunity of asking any searching questions nor even to express an opinion. The young Muhammadan felt as though he was being borne along on the top of a wave that was not of his own raising. It was Kismet, Fate, the irresistible undercurrent which according to Moslem belief guides and governs the lives of all human beings.

In spite of the Sahib's efforts the conversation presently dropped. Hassan seized on the opening and reverted to his

distress at having been torn away from his English love. His father again diverted him from the subject and brought the conversation back to the bride who was waiting for him.

The Palace Agent produced a string of pearls, beautiful in their purity. He held it out for the other to take.

"This, my son, is the bridegroom's gift to his bride on the wedding night. When you have removed her veil and calmed the trepidation that she will feel at your touch, you will put this round her neck. Unless I am very much mistaken our new daughter will be so charmed and delighted that she will forget her natural fear of you and be ready to give you of her best."

Hassan handled the rope gently, drawing the gems through his fingers. It was composed of four strands and would have been fitting for the Nizam's favourite.

"You have spent much money on me, my father," said Hassan, gratefully.

"It is well spent if it brings you and your sweet wife happiness."

The pearls had been one of the Sahib's purchases in Bombay.

(2)

They arrived at Hyderabad. The Sahib's car met them at the railway station. Hassan gazed with fascinated eyes at the familiar scenes as they drove through the crowded streets to the huge building that was his home. He noted little change in the appearance of the city and none at all when the car drew up at the chief entrance. The outside of the building showed no sign of alteration. It was just as he had left it, grey with heat and dust and curiously shabby after the smart dwellings of Beltonville. The venetian shutters to the few windows looking into the street wanted painting. One of them had a broken hinge and it had partially fallen, giving a half-ruined character to that part of the house. There was nothing about the place to suggest that any measures had been taken to welcome back the long-absent son.

At the sound of the motor horn the heavy door of the mansion was opened and a crowd of retainers appeared in the entrance hall. They were dressed in their best. They took precedence according to their rank in the household and

advanced to make their salaams as the master and his son entered.

The door was closed on a gaping crowd that was quickly gathering in the street. With the usual exaggeration of the East it was whispered that the son of the Palace Agent had arrived from England, and that he was the bearer of gifts and messages for the Nizam from no less a person than the King of England.

The greetings over from the general staff of the house, Hassan was conducted to the harem. Here another ovation was given to him, foremost among the welcoming group of women being his mother. A few tears fell from her eyes as they rested on the beloved form of her youngest son. Her heart had ached when he was taken away from her but she had realized that it had been the best thing for him if he was to fulfil his father's wishes and be fitted for the chosen career.

Hassan found his mother aged in her face and figure but still upright and full of quiet self-possession and dignity.

His sisters-in-law invoked the blessing of the Prophet on his head and presented their children, dressed in gay satin pyjamas expressly made for the occasion. Garlands were hung about his neck and rose-water sprinkled over his person. Then came the elderly women who had served as nurses to the family. They cracked their fingers over his head to keep off the evil spirits and touched him with lingering hands as though they still longed to hold in their arms the child they had once hushed to sleep.

He cast a glance of curiosity round him. He wondered if his bride was hidden among the group whose eyes were devouring him. But he was not allowed to lose himself in reviving memories of the harem ways. His father gave him only a few minutes and then carried him off to the men's quarters where his brothers greeted him in friendly and genial fashion, accepting him on a level with themselves as a man and no longer a boy.

He had no time to brood or think about the girl who was never to be his. When he had finished renewing his acquaintance with old friends and relatives his attention was drawn to the wedding garment displayed for his approval. Four excited tailors who had been engaged upon it for some weeks past waited for the fitting-on.

It was a long coat of white satin richly embroidered with gold thread and pearls. He was to be deprived of his neat

tweed trousers to which he had grown accustomed, and in their place he was to don pale blue pyjamas, the national garment of the Muhammadan. A turban folded in the fashion adopted by married men was fitted over the little embroidered muslin cap worn under the turban. An aigrette and some handsome jewelled brooches held the folds in place.

He would be allowed to retain his silk shirt and socks which he had bought at the Army and Navy Stores in London. For the rest he felt as though they intended to strip him of everything that was English. By magic he was to be transformed into a true follower of the Prophet, never to relapse into the costume or habit of the infidels among whom he had spent so many of his early years.

After the fitting he was unable to find the clothes in which he had arrived. They had disappeared and in their place he was offered the Mussalman dress as worn by his father.

Two men acted as valets. They had been well trained in their duties. They explained that the Sahib would prefer that his son should be dressed in the same fashion as himself. He had chosen the garments that were offered. Would the young master be pleased to put them on?

Hassan felt that fate was at work in guiding his course. He was being restored to the position in which he had been born. It became increasingly difficult to identify himself with the Western life he had led for the last fifteen years. It all came naturally, this throwing off an adopted nationality and once more assuming his position as an Oriental.

If he had wished it to be otherwise, if he had desired to retain any of the characteristics and habits that brought him so near to the English girl who had given him her love, he was allowed no opportunity of maintaining the change.

His food was served as his father's and brothers' was served. In place of the roast and boiled meat and vegetables he had eaten at the well-appointed dinner-tables in England and recently on board ship, dishes of moolay, pillau and other highly-seasoned savouries were set before him. The smell of them threw him back into the past and whetted his appetite. He accepted them with a strange feeling of gratification and was not conscious of any regrets.

It did not cross his mind to wonder if this unseen wife, chosen for him like his clothes and dishes of food, would also be to his taste. He believed that Phillis still held her place in his affections. She was the wife of his dreams. He missed

her dominating personality, her acute criticisms of life as it presented itself to her. He felt as though a strong support had been removed. Would he have resumed his old life under her eyes without a single protest—without an effort to retain some of the habits that had seemed more civilized than those of his nation?

Memory suddenly asserted its power and he visualized Phillis gazing at him in the embroidered garments and loose pyjamas that he was now wearing, as she invited him to accompany her to her fowl-yard to see her newly-hatched chicks. He could detect the curl of her lips as she noted the feminine pearls and gold embroideries on the coat that he would put on as soon as his meal was ended.

A mad desire to escape seized him, to return to the country where he had learnt other ways, other habits. Then he thought of his father. The inherited instinct of obedience outweighed his rebellious aspirations. He realized that his life must be spent as a unit of the Moslem nation. It was impossible for him to be of the West as well as of the East. Kismet had made of him, the son of his father, a Muhammadan, and a Muhammadan he must remain to the end of his days.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

IT was night, between the hours of nine and ten. A great company of friends and relatives, young men and old, had assembled at the house of the Palace Agent. They had been bidden to the wedding feast given by the Sahib Adam-u-din in honour of the marriage of his youngest son.

On arrival they had been received ceremoniously by father and son. They had been garlanded and presented with small gilded bottles of attar of rose. Sherbet and syrup drinks were offered by the attendants who were presided over by the major-domo of the establishment. The old man had been in the service of the family ever since he was a boy. He was a few years older than his master and, like him, had married and raised a family.

It was a proud moment in his life. He had ruled the large staff of servants at the marriages of the two elder sons of the house. It was his one hope that he might do the same when the last son would need his services for such an occasion.

At ten o'clock Hassan at a sign from his father rose and retired from the feast. He was conducted to his dressing-room. There he laid aside the magnificent wedding garment and turban that he had worn all the evening and put on a lighter and more simple suit of fine muslin. His turban was white. It was without ornament and could easily be laid aside.

His father took him by the hand and led him to the door of the harem where he found his mother and most of the women waiting for him.

He entered and the door was closed against the outside world which it was presumed that for a time he would forget. Twenty minutes later a purdah was drawn aside and he was introduced to the suite of rooms in which he was to make his home with the partner chosen for him.

A dais mounted by three steps occupied the centre of the room. On it stood a huge four-post bed newly upholstered with a brilliant cretonne. The bed was nine feet square. Over it was draped a canopy from which hung mosquito curtains. The bed was piled with cushions of down covered

with silk of all colours. It was not cold enough to require the silk quilts that lay folded in readiness at the foot. Electric bulbs under tinted shades threw a subdued light on everything.

With slow, almost reluctant, steps he entered the wedding chamber almost fearing to tread in the silence that surrounded him.

Between the bed and the entrance stood a figure dressed in soft folds of silk chiffon of pearly white. A veil covered her face and half her form.

Hassan's heart beat as he approached his bride. Her hands were brought together palm to palm in respectful greeting.

He came close to her and could smell the jasmine flowers of the wreath she wore. The little hands fluttered down with the slight tremble of the aspen leaves touched by the gentle breeze of the dawn.

Delicately he took the border of the veil in his fingers—they were not too steady either—and lifted it slowly as though half afraid of the liberty he was taking.

She remained quiescent and unresisting although her heart was throbbing with even great rapidity than his own.

He gently turned away the folds of the veil, which was not fastened, and allowed it to fall upon the floor.

Fully sixty seconds he stood motionless like a man who sees some mysterious and unexpected sight which he cannot account for. With a sharp exclamation of profound astonishment he uttered one word only.

"Phil!"

She made no reply but there was the familiar, the beloved smile on her lips that had met him so often in the past on his arrival at the old Hall. What was the meaning of it? What had brought her there? He gasped and found his voice with difficulty.

"Phillis! What is this? How did you come here?" he demanded in English.

She replied in the language of the harem.

"Husband, my lord, you must not speak English to your poor little wife. She has never learnt it and doesn't understand one word of it. I am called Fatima and not—what was it you said?"

He caught his breath in his surprise. The sound of her voice thrilled him, electrified him. It was Phillis again in her gentlest mood.

And yet as he scanned the figure before him there was a distinct difference. Fatima, now that she was no longer disguised in the dye that had been applied to deceive Miss Norton, dark tints that had coloured her skin and her hair, was as fair as a jasmine blossom.

Whereas Phillis was tanned by the sun and her outdoor life and had the wild rose of the country lanes in her cheeks, Fatima was ethereally pale. Her secluded life within the harem had robbed her of all colour. Her hair was of a lighter brown than Phil's and it was worn differently. The English girl had shingled her head and washed it frequently with soap and water with the result that it had brought out the lighter tints.

In Fatima's case the hair had been allowed to grow long. After being freed from the black dye her fair tresses were kept oiled to such an extent that they lost their golden lights. The long plaits were scented with sandalwood oil and brushed smooth till they shone like polished freshly-cut oakwood. Woven into the plaits were strings of pearls and down their length they were clasped by golden hair-slides set with gems.

"Husband! lord! You are not angry with me because I cannot speak English?" she cried, appalled at his silence.

Her words recalled him to his senses. Her strong likeness to Phillis had raised a whirlwind of confused thought with wild conjectures.

"My beautiful lily! My flower of the garden! My moon of delight. I am dumb with admiration of your starlight beauty. Where did you get your ivory skin? Your blue eyes? Your fair hair? Not from a Persian mother!"

"I don't know. The poor lady who used to scream and frighten us was a Persian. But I learned afterwards that she was my aunt and not my mother. I think my real mother must have died when I was a baby."

"And your father, my beautiful?"

"I was told that he died soon after my mother. There was no one to take care of me or love me. The Sahib had pity on the poor little baby and gave me shelter. Oh, I love him and his wife my aunt. They have been so good to me!"

By this time Hassan had his bride in his arms. Her head was against his breast. He was too busy with the promptings of his own rising passion to pay much heed to what she was saying.

She snuggled to him as if seeking protection.

“They tell me that now you will take care of me. The blessing of the Prophet be upon your head! If you wish it I will try to learn that troublesome English that you speak so easily——”

“Delight of my heart! I don’t want you to learn it. I only want you to kiss me. Shall I teach you how?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

WHEN the excitement of having dismissed Hassan and ejected him from her life had died down, Phillis was conscious of a strong reaction. Everything which she had mapped out for the future had fallen to pieces. She found herself obliged to reconstruct her plans and follow new lines of occupation which entailed entirely fresh aims.

Her first thoughts went to her wardrobe. In view of a suitable outfit for the climate of India she had placed a large order with her dressmaker. She had ordered frocks of diaphanous material such as the dressmaker assured her that she would need in the tropics. These would not now be of any use. Norfolk has a cool bracing climate even in summer. Light tweeds are more useful than chiffons whether walking or driving.

Her car was a two-seater, with plenty of room at the back for the various kind of goods she found occasion to carry. This she fortunately had not sold.

She countermanded many of the clothes that were intended for the trousseau. So as not to disappoint the dressmaker she ordered an outfit suitable for life on the land. Some time ago she had adopted a masculine suit for boating on the broads. Now she indulged in breeches of corduroy and Melton cloth, tunics of khaki drill reaching half-way to the knees, puttees, gaiters, waistcoats, socks and close-fitting caps. She chose several pairs of boots suitable for trudging over heavy land and swampy marshes.

The first morning on which Phil appeared in her new kit, Uncle Harry burst into a fit of laughter which by no means disconcerted the unabashed young land-girl.

"Good old Phil!" he cried as soon as he could speak. "You look fine, typical of the Beltons. I had no idea you had so much flesh on your bones. You fill your breeches nobly."

Uncle Dick had no remark to make but he smiled broadly. The wearer of the new breeches could detect no condemnation in the smile.

"Useful rig-out—" he commented at length. "And what does it mean my dear?"

"It means, Uncle Dick, that from henceforth I'm going to be your assistant, your articted pupil if you like to call it that. No more husbands for me! Do you think I shall do?"

"An arrangement that will suit me down to the ground," he replied. "But no playing at it, mind! I'll make a first-rate young farmer of you. What does Aunt Olive say to it?"

Mrs. Oakley was too wise a woman to oppose any method her niece might adopt to heal a wounded heart. Phil was too young to have sustained an irreparable blow but her dignity had been severely hurt. Mrs. Oakley believed that youth would find its own way of recovering its balance.

"I'm not in favour of women adopting men's dress—" began Aunt Olive.

Phil burst into laughter herself.

"Dear Aunt Olive! Of course you wouldn't like it for yourself. You would look killingly funny in cords like these I am wearing even if you were in the saddle. But for the work I intend doing they are exactly right. You need not think that I am going to forsake my old duties. I shall still look after the dairy with Betsy and I shall continue to run my own fowls. I shall do the shopping for you and keep in touch with old Harrod who buys our surplus garden stuff."

"What is it that you particularly want to do—in that dress?" asked Mrs. Oakley mildly.

"I'm going round every morning with Uncle Dick so that if his rheumatism ever lays him up I can at least deputize for him." She turned to Belton with a question. "What is your job this morning Uncle? Anything in which I can help?"

"I've got to see to that new bull I've just bought. A hundred pounds I gave for him."

"When did he arrive?"

"He should have been here yesterday afternoon but the drovers only came in this morning. They said they had some trouble with him. He turned nasty in his temper the further they got along the road. They were very glad to see him safe into our straw yard. He's been fed and watered and I dare say he's in a better temper by this time."

"Give him five or six young cows and he'll settle down quietly enough," said Phil.

"That's just what I am after this morning. I want to pick out which of the heifers I'll give him. He isn't Frisian in breed. He's real old Suffolk red-polled and his wives must

be Suffolks. Olive, my dear, Phil and I may be a little late for lunch. I can't say how long this job will take. It depends on whether the bull is still tetchy."

"I'll take some sugar for him," said Phil going to the side-board and emptying the lump-sugar basin.

"His thoughts aren't on sugar just now," said Belton as he rose from the breakfast table. "Come along Phil. Go to the stable and choose a couple of sharp-tined hay forks with the longest handles you can find."

"We're not going to bed him down, are we?"

"No, the forks are only in case he turns nasty. He's sure to know what they're for. He won't attack us if he sees we're armed."

Three of the men joined them outside. They carried forks also. The party went off without delay. All eyes were upon the young figure in breeches and tunic.

"That's Miss Phil," said the oldest man of the party.

"Ah! she'll do," responded the second with approval.

"She handles her fork properly," commented the third.

"Now then!" cried the master. "Let's be off and pick out the cows, the red-polled, they have to be. Daisy will be one of them. She wants new blood. So does Cowslip."

He talked as he walked and his men grunted their assent without remark.

They entered the field into which the cows had been turned after they had been milked. Six were chosen and separated into a herd which was driven without difficulty by a lane to the field where they were to live for the present. Their new home, a meadow, was surrounded by a high hedge. At the far end was a shed with one side open where the animals could shelter from rough weather.

"Don't flurry the cows," cried Belton to Phil who was inclined to hustle the disturbed beasts in her haste to get things done. "Keep 'em good tempered else quite likely they will turn against their new master. They must take kindly to him and he to them if he's to settle down and lose his tetchiness."

Farming operations of all kinds must be carried on with deliberation and without haste. The pace of the plough, the reaper and the seed-drill must not be hurried. Animals have to be driven slowly. Even the farm horse should never be pressed out of a walk if he's to work as many hours as his driver.

This entire absence of speed has entered the blood of the

agriculturist. He is slow and deliberate in all his thoughts and movements. He is essentially a man of peace, slow to anger and slow to take action when roused.

"Now for Old Hemp" (the East Anglian term for the Devil) said Phil as she turned away.

"Young Hemp you should call him," responded Belton as he followed her. "He's a young beast."

They walked some half mile back to the Hall. The bull was in a shed attached to the straw-yard. It was busy at the manger in which the yardman had given it a feed of chopped turnips. It was still wearing the head-stall by which it had been led to its new quarters. A ring in its nose suggested that there were times when it required disciplinary measures.

The men went quietly up to it and fastened by strong swivels two oak leads about the thickness of the handles of the rakes they carried, to the head-stall. The animal was busy finishing its food, the last chip of the swede turnip had been lapped up by its tongue.

Phil approached the bull with a handful of her lump sugar and dropped it in the manger. Hemp sniffed at it and tasted it. Finding it to his liking he eat it greedily turning his prominent eyes upon her as though he was quite aware of who was his benefactor.

While this was going on two of the men ranged themselves on either side. A gentle pressure on the leads suggested a backing out of the shed. The animal obeyed their directions and allowed himself to be guided through the straw-yard and out as far as the road.

Phil kept by his side patting him occasionally on his curly hornless head as if to reassure him that all was well.

"He fared to like that there sugar you gave him, Miss. Have you got any more?" asked one of the men.

She handed him half a dozen lumps which he presented to the bull on his open palm. While disposing of this with much dribbling they got him going. Suddenly memory seemed to be jogged. Hemp recalled the miseries he had undergone at the hands of the two strange drovers the day before and their yapping dog.

He stopped dead and refused to budge.

"Stand clear, sir," cried one of the men. "We're going to have trouble."

Phil slipped out of the way, her fork held on guard like a

lance. Belton hung back. The two men at the leads pulled. The third man went behind and gave Hemp a smack over the back with the handle of the fork.

Progress was made somehow. It was an erratic course owing to Hemp's vain dashes and attempts to turn back to the spot where he had found the delectable swedes.

The distance was covered at last and the entrance to the meadow reached.

Phil manipulated the gate. The unwilling bridegroom was forcibly introduced to his new home and his six brides.

His harem was disturbed by the noise. They raised their heads and stared. They gathered that no personal danger threatened them and were satisfied.

Hemp, safely through the gate, sniffed the air and gazed at his wives who were awaiting him. He seemed in no great hurry to join them.

Belton leaned over the gate now refastened. His eyes rested on the red roof of a cottage that could just be seen over the distant fence.

"That's old Jane Barber's cottage," he remarked to Phil. "You had better tell her that we've put a new bull in this field and she had best keep away from it for the present."

"The bull won't hurt her," said one of the men.

"Not as long as he's got his cows with him. But they have to come up to the neat-house to be milked and he'll be left by himself for a short time in the field. I wouldn't care to be with him myself when he's alone," said Belton as he turned away to go home.

"I'll go and tell Jane about the bull," said Phil.

"Don't let her keep you. It's just on one o'clock. You'll have to change Phil. You're covered with mud. And tell old Jane I can't do anything to her pig-sty yet. She doesn't pay me any rent and she expects me to be always spending money over the old place. I've just given her a new brick oven."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

JANE'S sharp old eyes had discovered the presence of the master at the bottom of the field with the cattle. She was hoping to get speech with him but he was too wary to be caught.

She noted that Missie, as Phil was generally called, was approaching by way of the field. Phil had not troubled to go round by the lane that skirted the field but had struck straight across. She still carried her six-foot long fork although she had little fear that she would have need for it.

Hemp was already busy making the acquaintance of the members of his new harem by whom he was being kindly greeted.

The gift of sugar was not forgotten. A human being who could provide welcome titbits was not likely to interfere with his love affairs and render herself obnoxious.

There was an opening in the hedge that divided Jane's garden from the field. It was filled in with a strong stile over which Phil climbed.

"Uncle Dick sent me to tell you that we have turned the new bull and his cows into the meadow; he thinks you had better not cross the field at present. Just see how the bull settles down first. And don't hang your wash on the fence where he can get at it or he may chew it up into rags."

"I'll mind him all right, Miss Phil. Come you inside for a few minutes."

"I mustn't stay long. Lunch will be ready by the time I get home."

"Just you look at this pig-sty, me dear. My old sow will pig before long, and how am I to keep her and her litter in the sty with it all tore down in one corner. She'll get into the middar and root it up which the master won't like. There'll be a nice piece of work to keep her out."

"I'll speak to Mr. Belton about it. Now I really must be off."

"Not afore you've seen my bad leg. I'm afraid the sore is spreading upwards."

By a rapid movement Jane's clothes were turned back above the knees.

"I don't think the inflammation is spreading," said Phil.

"I tell you that it is. It's going up under the skin and when that gets up into my waist it will kill me."

The petticoats would go no higher. The poor thin old legs were exposed fully to Phil's gaze for Jane was innocent of undies of any kind. A chemise and flannel petticoat such as her mother had been contented with constituted Jane's underwear.

"Lawk! the pain fare so bad at night as soon as I get warm in bed. I can't get any rest not no how."

"It's rheumatism that troubles you," said Phil. "Cover yourself up before the cold gets to it."

But Jane was very unwilling to hide her inflamed limbs from view.

"I'll send you some winter-green ointment the same as the master uses. You rub it in well before you go to bed and see if it doesn't ease you."

Phil seized her pitchfork and hurried to the stile which she climbed over, returning the way she had come.

Mrs. Oakley and the two uncles were already at the dinner-table when Phil appeared. She had changed into a light tweed skirt and coat which Mrs. Oakley observed with approval. There was no lingering over the plain substantial meal, a well cooked joint and a fruit pudding to follow.

It was Phil who answered her aunt's question as to how they had fared in the morning's work. Belton finished his plate of excellent apple pudding. Refusing a second helping he rose from his chair preparatory to retiring to the gun-room for a rest. He looked at his niece.

"Are you going out this afternoon Phil?" he asked.

"I've no engagement if that is what you mean. Anything I can do for you?"

"Yes; I wish you would drive to Smith, the vet, and tell him to come along at once to deal with those little pigs, old Sally's last litter. They must be ringled or we shall have them rooting up the whole of the orchard."

Belton mentioned another operation that was necessary and added.

"Tell Smith if he can't come at once I must get another man. He's failed me twice. Press of business, he says."

"All right, Uncle; I'll rub the order in sufficiently to bring him along to-morrow at the latest. If he fails there's young Ratcliff, anxious to get our custom. He's very good at his job I'm told. We're not bound to employ Smith."

She was leaving the room when Mrs. Oakley called her back.

"Phil, I particularly want you home in time for tea. Mr. Ringwood, the Rector is coming; he wants to see us both on business."

"I think I know what he's after!" said Phil with a laugh as she disappeared.

Mrs. Oakley wondered what she meant. Was the middle-aged bachelor attracted? But Phil was too young, too much of a country girl to suit a man of his conventional habits. Mrs. Oakley called to her brother who was on his way to the door through which his niece had disappeared.

"One moment, Dick. Do you think—is it necessary to send Phil to the vet about the pigs? It's not a nice subject for a girl to handle."

"If Phil is to be of any use to me, she can't pick and choose what she will put her hand to. She's just the one to manage Smith and make him understand that our business must be attended to and not be pushed aside for other people's. Phil has got a sharp side to her tongue which makes a man like Smith respect her."

Aunt Olive sighed. She had been immensely relieved when Phil had given up all thoughts of going to India. Now she was confronted with a reaction in another direction that was attracting the girl strongly.

Stock raising and breeding involved much knowledge that was not a subject for conversation in the drawing-room. Yet such knowledge was as necessary to the successful farmer as certain intimate details were necessary to the surgeons and nurses of the hospitals. Mrs. Oakley did not approve of Phil's determination to learn practical farming.

But her brother gave her no help. Privately he had been extremely thankful when Phil suddenly turned her attention to matters connected with the cultivation of the land and the raising of good pedigree stock. He could see in her the making of a useful assistant. If by chance she married a man of the same tastes as her own Belton would be happy in the thought that the family acres would be well cared for. He was some way off old age and decrepitude. There were many good years before him. But there were moments when

he was conscious of the fact that he was not as young as he had been.

He had never ceased to miss his brother. Clement had been his second self on the estate. It is true they had divided the work between them but there had never been two opinions as to how it should be done. Belton had suddenly seen in his young niece a possible successor to Clement. She would have to serve as an apprentice and learn her job, but he saw no reason why this should not be accomplished and he was not going to allow his sister to put any obstacles in the way.

Phil must learn how soon the animals reached maturity, how long it would be before maternal cares overtook them. And when the time came she must be ready to lend a hand with hot water, warm bran mashes, and feeding bottles, and not shrink from the rough midwifery of the stockyard.

Another interest was claiming Phil's attention. This was connected with the parish; the old, and the new portion that Belton had built and called Beltonville.

The last Rector, a widower with his children grown-up and scattered over the world, had faded out. No one regretted his death. All eyes were turned on the man who had taken his place.

The new Rector had different ways. He was quiet and pleasant in his manner. Eastern counties' folk were always ready to be friendly although they were never demonstrative. When Belton asked one of his men how he liked Mr. Ringwood's preaching the reply was:

"Well, sir, I'm a little hard of hearing and I ain't used to his voice. But from the way in which he was a-going on, he fared to be doing it properly."

Jane declared that he'd do; only folks would have to get used to him.

"He's that easy in his ways that you fare to forget he's only a bachelor with everything to learn about a woman," said Jane to Mrs. Oakley.

"But though he is a bachelor, I don't see why he shouldn't have learned all that is necessary for him to know about the mothers and children who come under his spiritual care," said Mrs. Oakley when Jane called at the Hall for the welcome portion of surplus dripping that was given out to some of the old people.

"You can larn a single man all you like but until he's

married he won't have larned all there is to know, not if his wife has her wits about her," responded Jane.

"There's a bit of salt fat pork the cook has saved for you. It's all fat," said Mrs. Oakley.

"So much the better. Thank ye, mum. Yes, I like Mr. Ringwood. I allus show him my bad leg. It's good for him to see it. There's allus one thing I tell him. I hope and pray he'll be by my bedside when I'm took. Keep the parson in and the Devil out. That's an old saying folks don't seem to think of nowadays."

The Rector often found his way to the old Hall. Mrs. Oakley was a good listener. She sympathized with him over his parish troubles and made excuses for the parishioners' shortcomings. He could not but admit that they were wedded to the ways of their fathers and mothers before them.

He introduced extra services and strengthened and improved the choir, putting the boys and men in surplices and relegating the girls to the back seats of the chancel where they were almost hidden.

The new services were ignored except by the visitors in the summer. And it is to be feared that they often preferred an early dip in the sea to the call of the church bell to the eight o'clock morning service.

The regular inhabitants of the village turned up faithfully enough at the eleven o'clock matins on Sunday and some of them attended the midday celebration once a month. The women and children appeared at the evening service when the Rector gave a short sermon. Everything else they refused to have anything to do with on the score of its being highly inconvenient.

"Eight o'clock in the morning is an ongain time to go to church," said Betsy. "I can't finish my dairy work and get dressed so 'arly."

Ringwood recounted his difficulties to Mrs. Oakley and complained that his people were hard to teach.

"You had better fit yourself into their ways than attempt to turn them into yours. Be content with them as they are. As a parish I think we do very well and we ought to be very contented."

But Mr. Ringwood was not contented with matters as they were and he was looking for help in his difficulties from the Hall.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

THE Old Hall was one of those solidly built East Anglian houses that are still to be found. Too often they are tenanted by the farmer who rents the land. The old-fashioned Squire has disappeared, banished by the politicians who believe that there is no further use for him. Here and there the yeoman farmer as he is called in East Anglia remains like Belton and is faithful to the tradition of his race. But he is not of a county family and bears no arms. He is content with his position and follows as closely as modern innovations will allow in the footsteps of his ancestors.

Comfort was the characteristic feature of the old Hall. The house was warm and dry, the rooms free from draughts. There was something cheerful about the shape of the living-rooms, as the sitting-rooms were called. Light, air and sunshine penetrated to all the corners of the great square house, lighting up the substantial range of attics where servants and children had slept in the past. And there they had found greater comfort than they would have found in these days in the best suites of the modern barracks called "desirable flats."

The most attractive room in the old Hall was the drawing-room. It had resisted all attempts to term it a parlour. It was a drawing-room in every sense of the word.

The old furniture was very much as it had been a century ago except for new covers made periodically. Even the arrangement of the heavier bits was much the same as in Mrs. Oakley's grand-parents time.

With the introduction of afternoon tea a certain round table had been pulled forward and brought into use. Originally it was what was called a loo-table. It was made by an old estate carpenter who had a turn for upholstery, towards the end of the eighteenth century. It was composed of wood grown on the estate, oak, yew and walnut. A single pedestal was firmly mounted on feet carved in the shape of claws.

There were other tables smaller and lighter that could easily be moved. They held plates of muffins, scones and cakes.

Round an oasis of laden tables were arranged comfortable chairs. In course of time each chair had its regular occupant.

Mrs. Oakley took the seat in front of the tea-tray. Dick dropped into a seat by her side in such a position that he could find a place for his cup and plate and put his feet beneath the round table.

Oakley sat opposite to him in a lounge chair by the side of which was a small table that he had to himself.

Phil, usually late and sometimes absent altogether, found a place for herself on the other side of Belton where she could attend to her uncle's needs and pass him up his favourite muffins and cakes.

If visitors were present room for them was found at the big round table opposite Mrs. Oakley who thus was enabled to talk to them whilst she dealt with the tea-pot.

Into this comfortable room with its scent of flowers was introduced Reginald Ringwood the recently appointed Rector of the parish.

It was a sunny afternoon but a cheerful log fire burnt in the grate. He drew in his breath with half a sigh of envy as he glanced round at the family party. Being a bachelor he owned no such room himself at the rectory and felt incapable of making such a retreat.

His own drawing-room was half-furnished and entirely without the arrangement that marked the hand of a "lady of the house." His housekeeper had done her best. She had been a cook in her young days and had married a green-grocer who had left her a widow. She did her best but she did not possess the subtle art of creating an atmosphere of comfort in any room.

Ringwood sat down after the warm old-fashioned greeting he had received. He was looked after by Harry who embarrassed the guest with a choice of dishes.

"Where's Phil?" asked Oakley. "This is her business."

"She will be in directly," said his wife.

"I sent her with a message to the vet," explained Belton quite unnecessarily in Mrs. Oakley's opinion.

She wished her brother would keep the affairs of the farm out of the drawing-room. He was apt to go into explanations of why the services of the vet were required if he was given the opportunity.

As Mrs. Oakley handed the visitor his cup of tea with its rich pools of cream still floating on the surface, she made an effort to switch off the conversation from her niece's errand to the Rector's own affairs.

"How is the garden getting on? It's high time you began your bedding out for the summer."

Ringwood explained that his gardener was very busy. The place had been sadly neglected in the past; no pruning done, no digging over bed and border, no cuttings made or seeds sown.

"I'm going to send you some boxes of seedlings," said Mrs. Oakley, "zinnias, asters, French and African marigolds and I hope to be able to spare a few dozen calceolarias and geraniums. Old-fashioned flowers but they do better than anything else."

"The gardener tells me that the soil is exhausted," remarked Ringwood.

"You must ask my brother to let you have a couple of loads of manure."

Belton smiled good naturedly.

"I'll try and manage it. But you know, Rector, I've no business to let you have even that amount. Every bit of stuff from the yards and sheds should be turned back into the land."

"You are your own landlord, Dick, and can do as you like," said Mrs. Oakley. "Two loads won't be missed, I'm sure."

Belton began to explain the obligation of the man who cultivated the land, and the laws that governed the very valuable produce of the stock-yards when to Mrs. Oakley's relief Phil came in and stopped a dissertation on the different properties of the "stable stuff" pig-sty muck and straw-yard sweepings. Also the rich yield from the fattening sheds where the cattle were highly fed. As Phil entered Dick broke off to ask——

"Well! Did you see the vet?"

"I luckily caught him at home and I talked to him like a mother. I threatened to call in the other man. That brought him to book."

"Did you tell him——"

"Rubbed it in well. He'll turn up all right. I informed him that I should be up and about when he got here to-morrow morning."

Belton laughed, relieved and at the same time pleased with his new assistant.

"The pigs must be driven into the shed beyond the orchard," said Belton. "Then we shan't be disturbed by

their squealings. Will you tell William about it and see that he makes no mistake? I have some letters to write."

"Poor wee mites," said Mrs. Oakley softly, thinking of the little pigs.

Phil, eating her toasted tea-cake, turned to the visitor.

"How are you getting on, Mr. Ringwood?" she asked in a friendly tone. "Had any success whipping up for your confirmation classes?"

"The boys are very shy about joining. The girls are less backward."

"Where's the trouble with the boys?" asked Mrs. Oakley who was listening.

The Rector was a favourite visitor with her. Already in her secret thoughts she was linking him up with Phil. What a practical wife she would make for a country rector with means of her own to help out the diminishing stipend that he drew. She lent a willing ear to his reply to her question.

"They don't like coming to the church for the lectures. They say they haven't time when work is over to get their tea and wash and dress for church. They won't come in their working clothes. What I want is a parish room."

"It's been a crying need ever since I've lived here," said Mrs. Oakley.

"I can't think how my predecessor managed without one."

"He held classes when he did have them, which was very rare, in the rectory drawing-room," said Phil. "He kept it unfurnished except for some benches and a chair and desk for himself."

"Where did he receive his callers?" asked Ringwood.

"In the study. But he had very few callers of the class that could not be shown into the empty drawing-room."

"I can't have people like the district visitors and parish nurse in the study with all my books and writing about. It would never do. I should have no privacy."

Ringwood turned a distressed glance on Phil who was even more ready with her sympathy than her aunt.

Belton had finished his tea. He rose from his seat asking to be excused on the plea of being busy. He turned to Phil touching her on the shoulder.

"My dear, don't forget about the sow and her pigs. They must be put somewhere well out of hearing and it must be where they can't root up the place. I think that further field will be most suitable. Old Sally has been there before. If

William feeds her there she will settle down for the night quietly enough. And it's a handy place for the vet to begin on them as soon as he arrives."

Belton departed thankful to have someone upon whom he could rely to see to a tiresome job like vet's business. Oakley was about to follow when Phil stopped him.

"One moment Uncle Harry. Sit down again for a minute. You heard what Mr. Ringwood said about the necessity for a parish room of some sort."

"There's the Beltonville public hall. It can be hired for any purpose."

"Not at all suitable," said Phil. "The people go there for concerts and music hall entertainments and its associations are against it."

"The public hall is almost always engaged in the evening," added the Rector. "My young people are not free to come to me till seven o'clock."

"What about the School?" asked Oakley.

"The Guardians are adamant on the subject. From six to nine each evening the charwomen and cleaners are in possession and on no account will permission be given to use the benches," explained Ringwood as patiently as he could.

It was a sore point with him. He had tried in every direction to find a room that would be suitable but without success. He had his church, he was told. Why couldn't he make do with that? In vain he pointed out that a pulpit was not like a platform from which he could speak confidentially and in a friendly manner; from which he could raise a laugh with a familiar anecdote and not be always driving home doctrine and religious teaching. He explained yet again to Harry Oakley his difficulty and Oakley listened with sympathy but without any other suggestion than the raising of a subscription and the erection of a parish hall near the church. All he seemed able to promise was his help in persuading Mr. Belton to give a bit of land as a site.

Phil suddenly broke into the conversation.

"Look here Uncle Harry you're going over old ground. We have already got as far as that but a brand new hall is a thing of the future. It will take time to collect money and to build. What Mr. Ringwood wants is a room here and now where he can hold his classes and I'm going to help him for all I'm worth to find it. And so are you, old dear."

"If you will only show me how I can help—" began Uncle

Harry, who knew what he was in for when his niece hurled herself body and soul into any scheme. He had been sorry for her in her troubles over her broken engagement and he was quite ready to lend a helping hand to any new project that might divert her attention and heal her wounded soul. Phil continued:

"Have you any unused building or room on your list? Or an empty house to let that we could rent for a small sum and make use of as a temporary parish room? We could take it for a year with the option of another year if it was found suitable."

"I'm afraid I haven't anything that will suit you," replied Oakley.

"What about those houses by the sea that you are changing into flats?"

"Everyone of them is in the hands of the workmen and I'm hurrying them on as fast as I can to be ready for July and August."

"Think again, Uncle Harry. Have you nothing that would suit us?"

Ringwood felt cheered by the manner in which Phil was identifying herself with him and his needs.

"Nothing that would be in a situation convenient enough," replied Oakley. "It must be something within a short walk of the church and village. There's a cow-shed——"

"A cow-shed wouldn't do," said Phil decisively. "It must have a floor of some sort, a door and window. The floor of a cow-shed is mud or something worse."

Ringwood refused more tea and the bell was rung for the removal of the tray.

"There's that old malt-house beyond the stock-yard in the direction of the church. It's not serving any purpose but to store implements that are not in use. But it has no windows," said Oakley.

"Ah! but it has a lovely floor," cried Phil. "I hadn't thought of it as a possible makeshift."

"Not much use without windows," remarked Oakley.

"We might get your workmen off those houses you're busy with to knock out a window or two," said Phil.

"Which would make it useless as an oasthouse," protested Oakley. "And what would Dick say to that?"

"I'll talk him over," countered Phil. "If ever he wants it again for malting I'll undertake to have the windows bricked

in. But he won't want it. Grandfather gave up malting I'm told before I was born. He gave up growing barley and put in wheat. The old malt-house is solidly built and its floor is raised from the ground so that it is quite free from damp. You used to say that it would make a first-rate dance floor if we had needed it."

"Well, you can ask Uncle Dick about it. But first you must let Mr. Ringwood see it. If he thinks it will serve his purpose with a few alterations I'll help you all I can."

"You are an old darling!" cried Phil as her uncle prepared to go his ways. "I believe we've solved the difficulty at any rate temporarily."

CHAPTER THIRTY

PHIL turned to Ringwood.

"Rector, will you come now at once and have a look at the malt-house? You must tell me if it will do—temporarily we'll say—as a parish room till we can get something better."

"If it is not taking up too much of your time," he replied.

"I have to go in that direction to see after old Sally. The shed where Uncle Dick wants them penned is on the way to the malt-house. Just wait a minute while I change. I can't go driving pigs in these clothes."

"Must you go, Phil?" protested her aunt. "Give an order to the yard-man and he'll do it for you."

"If you want a thing done on the farm, do it yourself or see it done with your own eyes, is a good old slogan I've already learnt from Uncle Dick," said Phil as she ran to get herself into breeches and tunic again.

Ringwood was quite content to sit chatting a little longer with Mrs. Oakley. She was a good listener and he found comfort in her sympathy.

A pause occurred. With some hesitation he ventured to mention Phil's broken engagement with her Oriental lover. Mrs. Oakley was not sorry to have an opportunity of reassuring him on the subject.

"It's all off; completely so and not likely to come on again."

"Has he left the country?"

"Yes, and must be home and married by this time."

"Then it was true that he had a wife in India."

"He was as good as married although of course he and his bride had not lived together. She was too young. Those people of the East have strange ways. I understand that a man doesn't set eyes on his wife till he meets her in the bridal chamber. The girl may be as ugly as a monkey for all he knows. She is kept shut up in the women's quarters."

"There must be many strange secrets in the harem which never come to light," he said.

"And we can't be too thankful that dear little Phil has escaped. The lawyers assured us that Phil's twin sister who

disappeared so mysteriously was dead. I often wonder—" said Mrs. Oakley.

She checked herself as Phil entered the room, her skirt exchanged for the land-girl's costume.

Phil carried two light ash sticks. One she handed to the Rector.

"What's this for?" he asked, looking her up and down with approval tempered with disapproval. He could not but admit that it was a suitable and decent dress for the farm-yard yet his principles would not allow him to approve of masculine dress for women.

"You'll find out as soon as we begin to drive those pigs. Have you ever driven pigs?"

"I don't think I have. It can't be a difficult job."

"You will soon find out!"

William the yard-man came at her call and Joe a lad with him. She explained her errand and told him of her visit to the vet and the master's order.

"Where's old Sally?"

"In the orchard, Missie. She and her litter are turning the place into a ploughed field. It won't do the apple trees any harm but it's on again for walking over. Those little mucks of hers badly want ringling."

"The vet will be here without fail to-morrow morning at seven o'clock. I shall be here also and if he doesn't come I shall go off with my car and bring the other man back with me." She turned to Ringwood. "Your trousers Mr. Ringwood. The bottoms must be folded up as high as the tops of your boots or you'll have them all mud. Now then for old Sally!" She led the way towards the orchard.

Old Sally was the worst offender of the lot. She was showing her progeny how to run their noses under the turf, and pick up the grubs exposed by the process.

A fine pig hunt began. Phil and her two assistants from the yard concentrated on Sally herself, knowing that the sow's family would follow. Phil used her stick freely but not severely on the old lady's back, and her squeals frightened the piglets and made them scatter in all directions. Joe did his best to round them up, using a similar long stick on their backs.

"Don't hurt them Joe," cried Phillis. "Look out Mr. Ringwood." He had been hovering about safely in her rear.

At the dispersion of the pigs he suddenly found himself in their midst.

"What am I to do?" he cried.

"Head off the little ones. Don't let them double back. They're coming straight for your legs. Joe! stop that spotted one from getting among the apple trees. Open the wicket gate William. If we can get Sally through it, the pigs will follow. Shoo! Shoo! Old lady!"

William went forward and opened the gate fixing it open with a large stone evidently used for the purpose. The shed, their objective, was only a short distance from the gate. The way was familiar enough to the old sow. But with the perversity of her race she preferred to take any road but the one desired by her guardians.

"Shoo! Shoo!" yelled Phil jumping about and whirling her stick with the agility of a harlequin in a Christmas pantomime.

"Get on! you little warmints!" cried Joe trying to imitate his active young mistress.

"Come on old lady!" shouted William going to the shed and throwing open the door wide. "Come on now, and I'll bring you your supper."

Whack! whack! went the sticks, producing a chorus of shrieks till suddenly Sally realized that it would perhaps be wiser to seek shelter in her old quarters. She made a rush for the open door of the shed and her family followed helter-skelter at the imminent risk of tripping up the bearers of the dreadful sticks that stung as they fell across their bare backs.

Mr. Ringwood drew a sigh of deep relief as he watched William close the lower half of the door of the shed and fasten it. Phil had time to look round and observe how he had fared. The expression on his face made her smile.

"Ever driven pigs before?" she asked.

"No, I don't think I have."

"Contrary beasts at the best of times. I'm afraid you're rather in a mess," she said as she ran her eyes over his legs. "You didn't have a fall, did you?"

"No, but the little spotted pig ran between my legs, and rubbed itself against me."

"And it was covered with mud from the orchard. I hope you caught it a good whack with your stick."

"I'm afraid I let it escape without hitting it. It was like taking a stick to an infants' class."

Phil shouted with laughter.

"You're too tender hearted to be any good in the stock-yard. A stick is the only thing that they understand, the troublesome little beings! However, they'll be quieter after the vet has dealt with them."

She sent William and Joe back to their business of making everything snug and safe in the stalls and yards. At six they would be leaving off work, and if there was anything else to do it fell to the share of Belton and his niece to get it done somehow.

"Now let's go and look at the malt-house and then you must get Mrs. Pearce your housekeeper to give you a bit of a clean up."

As they walked they talked.

"I ought not to have come amongst the pigs in these clothes," said Ringwood, ruefully regarding the spots of drying mud with which his neat black clothes were bespattered.

"My fault," rejoined Phil. "I ought to apologize. Excuse me being rather personal. You know that long coat and those neat trousers are not suitable for a country parson. You need not wear breeches like me, but you might run to pepper and salt plus-fours and dark, grey stockings. I think heavier boots would be better than that swagger footwear you've got on."

"I came to have tea with your aunt in her pretty drawing room. I didn't know that I was going to be drawn into driving pigs——"

"Well, I don't suppose you've got any plus-fours whether or no you knew there was a likelihood of a pig-hunt."

They had reached the malt-house. It was surrounded by a neat fence and stood in a fair sized yard of its own, large enough to hold the carts that brought the barley.

Phil unlocked the door and pushed it open. The atmosphere was warm and dry but the place was dark. The only light it received came from a little, square window close up under the tiles.

"It wants light and air," said Ringwood as he picked his way with care over the floor.

Hay rakes, pitch forks, two or three old, wooden buckets and some pig-troughs stood about just where they happened to have been dumped by the tired men who had brought them.

"Of course it wants light and air," said Phil. "And I

must find another place where I can store all this truck. There's a hayloft over the stables that will do. It must be dry or the tools will rust."

"And what about letting a little light in?"

"That's a matter for Uncle Harry to see to. He's got the men if he'll only let us have their services. Windows are what we want, one in the East wall and one in the West."

"It will cost a few pounds to make the alterations," said the Rector.

"We'll send the hat round beginning with Aunt Olive," replied Phil complacently.

"I'm so often having to send the hat round, as you call it, I feel ashamed of doing it again. I have only just finished collecting for the organ."

"You leave it to me. I'll push it through if you think the place will do for what you want, when we've made the alterations. And look here! We'll pay Uncle Harry a small rent so as to establish our claim to it. Lease it for two years or for the duration of the building of the permanent parish room. It's a perfectly lovely floor."

Phil began to dance amidst clouds of dust which settled heavily on the Rector's dark clothes till he was as powdery as a miller. She whirled and circled round him till she made him feel quite giddy.

"You don't dance I suppose," she said holding out her arms.

"No, no! I never was fond of it, and I gave it all up when I took Orders," he answered hastily. There was no telling what his companion might be up to next.

"More's the pity," said Phil. Encouraged by the absence of skirts, she gave a few high kicks and ended her antics. "Makes you human to dance. Promotes friendliness to feel yourself in a man's arms, and puts you in tune with life."

She finished by catching his arm.

"Come along. We must get you cleaned up before anyone sees you!" and pranced off with him in the direction of the Rectory where she left him to the care of a scandalized Mrs. Pearce.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

THE temporary parish room was gradually evolved out of the old malt-house and took a serviceable shape. The Rector left the direction of the details mostly to Phil. She gave her Uncle Harry no rest until she had got what she wanted, she was a persistent young woman at all times. When she set her heart on carrying out a project she left no stone unturned to accomplish it. Her obstinate perseverance was apt to lead her into difficulties as was the case in her projected marriage with Hassan.

Here, however, she could make no mistake as far as the old building was concerned. The work-people, East Anglian to their finger tips, were slow after the manner of their kind but their work was good under Phil's sharp eyes and Oakley's sanction.

Three months later Phil entered into possession and introduced Ringwood to the new parish hall.

"This must serve until we can get the permanent hall built. I've got the site for it out of Uncle Dick and a good subscription as well."

The malt-house, from thence-forth to be called the parish room, was highly approved of by the Rector. Chairs and a table, a platform at one end, a cupboard and a long row of pegs on which caps and coats could be hung, were put into place. Ringwood and Phil both managed to look in at least once a day for a few minutes to mark the progress towards completion.

The parish took an immense interest in what was being done, and various people found time to glance in including Belton himself.

"The place must be insured against fire," he said as Phil proudly led him round.

"Done! Uncle Dick!"

"Good girl! we don't catch you tripping! And the rent?"

"I've settled that with Uncle Harry. Ten pounds a year, and he's to keep it in repair."

Besides the master and his employees, the young people

were still more interested and excited. The boys and girls from the Council School trooped up full of curiosity to look on, as each item was added. At first, they stood in the doorway and gaped at their new parish room. After a time they became bolder and seated themselves on the chairs arranged in rows ready for the audience.

A big boy of fourteen due very soon to leave school and find a billet on the old Hall Estate became too familiar with the place.

One day he turned up after school with his younger brother John. A little crowd of girls had assembled at the request of Phil to help her to clean out the cupboard and prepare it for the tea things it was intended to hold.

George, seeing the girls all eyes, thought they would make a good audience for some of his clownish tricks. He began to swagger and throw himself about, turning a somersault over the backs of the chairs. The chairs creaked ominously under his weight.

"Come off them there chairs, George, do you want to break them?" asked one of the big girls.

"You shut your mouth," he replied, twitching her hat off her head.

She dealt him a resounding slap on his cheek.

"If you don't keep your hands to yourself I shall have to kiss yer," he retorted.

He had his back to the door and did not observe the approach of Phil. She had just left her uncle and was in her work-a-day costume. She eyed George. She had overheard his threat.

"What are you doing here, George Banham?" she demanded severely.

"I heard as how you wanted helpers so I comed."

"I didn't invite you."

"Marnt I come and lend a hand as well as those gals?"

His tone was bold and impudent. She strode towards him.

"We'll see about that!"

Phil ran at him like a young fury. Before he could say another word she had him by the scruff of the neck. Her strong fingers that had helped to hold the protesting, squealing pigs when the vet thrust the copper wire into their snouts, gripped the collar of his jacket, and her knuckles dug into his neck.

A vigorous, well-directed kick behind sent him forward too

astonished in his slow nature to resist. He yielded to pressure and found himself running in front of her. Propelled through the door and out into the open he went. Every now and again Phil's sharp knee caught him a full blow behind, that jarred his spine painfully.

When they were quite clear of the building Phil thrust one foot forward and neatly tripped him up. He fell violently to the ground in a spread eagle.

One of the girls came running out with Phil's ash stick without which she seldom moved when seeing to the business of the farm. Instinctively she grasped it as she would have done had she been dealing with a refractory animal.

"Here, miss, take yar stick and do you use it on that boy, George. His father allus says that a good basting is the only thing he minds."

George was scrambling to his feet and looking thoroughly ashamed of himself. He was at a loss to know how to treat the light, young figure before him, standing there so sturdily with a stick in her hand that was no play-thing nor adopted for ornamentation. Had she been what she looked like in her masculine clothes, a man, he would have closed with her in his clumsy way.

But she was a "gal" and he remembered that she was the master's niece and so to speak "behind the throne." If he dared to lay a finger on her, there would be trouble.

His father was one of the hands on the farm drawing good wages all the year round. If George gave offence to the master his father would lose his billet. What was worse, with the loss of his employment would go the comfortable cottage that Banham and his family occupied at a nominal rent. George might well pause in his sudden self assertion.

Striding along the path from the Rectory came Ringwood. He had witnessed the little episode and was disturbed. George had also caught sight of him, and had begun to sneak away.

"Banham!" called the Rector. "What have you been doing?"

"I ain't a been doing nawthen, sir."

"It looks as if Miss Phil has been turning you out. Is that so?"

"Yes, sir," admitted George. "And she hev' got a hard knee and toe in them there breeches and boots."

"Go home and don't come here unless you're asked."

Ringwood hurried on. He wanted to hear Phil's story. If the boy had been rude to her as he suspected, it was for his father to deal with him. He entered the room. The girls were already wiping the shelves of the cupboard under Phil's directions. As soon as she caught sight of Ringwood she detached herself from the busy work of her assistants and came to meet him.

"Phil, what have you been doing to George Banham?"

"Chucking him out," she replied shortly.

"Have you—?" he glanced at the stick she held—"been giving him a-a-hiding?"

She laughed at the expression and the consternation that furrowed his brows.

"He didn't wait for that."

"It isn't quite the thing for you to do, to use violence with any of the lads of the village. Excuse me saying it but you really ought to keep your hands off them."

"That's as it may be," she replied. She was still feeling ruffled and combative at the memory of George's truculence.

"It isn't—what shall I say?—seemly."

"The boys don't understand anything but brute force—like the animals—and, what is more, they're going to get it from me if I think they need it."

Ringwood looked distressed. He was totally unaware of it, but he was losing his heart to this fascinating, little "farmeress." She was occupying his thoughts more and more each day that passed.

He was older than she was by fourteen or fifteen years. The difference in age was more to her than it was to him. When a man is in love, age is the very last consideration. "I am old enough to be her father!" he may assure himself but he does not feel it. She on the other hand says the same thing with possibly the addition that he might be her grandfather.

Yet Ringwood was barely half a generation ahead of Phil and was much too young to have been her father.

Whether he was beginning to lose his heart or not he did not stop to think. Another side of the question was presenting itself to his mind. It forced itself upon him at the present moment with a disquieting insistence. It was regarding her suitability as a Rector's wife.

He was badly in need of help in the parish, someone to manage the various clubs that ought to be started among the

women and girls; the visiting at the cottages, already practised by Phil who had picked up a great deal of Mrs. Oakley's work.

In Phil he would find an able help-meet, the right woman in the right place.

But he did not wish to have the parish managed "by brute force" as Phil had called it, without any mincing of matters. The Rector's wife would have to keep her hands off truculent boys.

There was another point that might prove difficult. The Rector's wife would have to relinquish her breeches and her ash-plant and leave the farm-hands to deal with the stock, the schoolmaster to bring the boys under discipline and the parents to administer any hidings that might be necessary.

Ringwood followed Phil into the room and glanced round approvingly with a smile that covered all doubts and misgivings. If only she would confine her attentions to such-like details and leave the George Banhams for other people to deal with!

"The room is looking fit for use," he said. "What more have you to do?"

"The girls are helping me to clean out the cupboard. I think this is the finishing touch," explained Phil.

"What have you got to put in the cupboard?"

"The tea things. I've bought a big tea-pot and a large kettle, and five dozen enamelled cups and saucers. We shall be able to give your classes and mothers' meetings tea."

"Won't that be nice, sir," said one of the girls. "I'd go anywhere for a cup of tea."

"So would I!" chorused the others.

"It's very kind of Miss Phillis. You must be good and give her all the help she needs," he replied.

An excellent counsel that was spoilt by Phil's rejoinder.

"Anyone who doesn't behave will be chucked out. I shall do my own ejecting."

She spoke in a loud voice to be heard by all, and her eye was upon John Banham, George's younger brother, a gentle boy whose health was not as robust as it might have been. Finding that she took no exception to his presence he had remained quietly seated near the door. He had watched with some secret satisfaction the treatment his bullying brother had received and intended to let his father have a full account of the incident.

Ringwood, as Phil resumed her superintendence of the cleaning of the cupboard, sat down by John's side and said a few words to him. His eyes followed Phil's movements. How he wished she would wear her coat and skirt. The girls were devoted to her and obeyed her lightest word. The last sheet of old newspaper was spread and the cupboard was ready.

"Now, girls, you may come up to the Hall to-morrow afternoon and help me to bring along the tea service. We will have our very first tea party here just to get into the way of making tea. We shall then be ready for Mr. Ringwood's opening meeting on Saturday."

"Shall we all come, Miss?"

"Certainly if your mothers will spare you."

"And can Johnny come too?" asked Caroline Banham timidly. "He'll be very good. He isn't like George." She was going on for sixteen and ought to be thinking of getting a place.

"Yes; he can make himself useful, looking after the kettle on the Primus stove and keeping it boiling. We shall want a lot of tea."

Johnny smiled happily. He had been afraid lest the sins of his brother might be visited on him. It was a relief to hear that banishment would not be pronounced on him. He preferred the companionship of his sister and her friends to the company of the rough lads who were his brother's friends.

"Now you may go home. Get along with you. Scoot, my dears! Buck up now."

Phil locked the door. Then she turned to Ringwood with an enquiry.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

"**W**HERE are you bound for, Rector?" she asked. She often addressed him as Rector. The people of the village used the term in preference to his name. On the whole he liked it. It was a recognition of his office and the position in which he stood towards them.

"Old Jane sent word by her granddaughter that she was much worse. The child said she thought her Grannie was dying."

"Dying! That's Jane all over. I'll walk a little way with you and see you safe to the cottage."

"You talk as if I were in danger," he remarked as he fell into Phil's stride.

"So you might be if you attempted to cross the meadow just now."

"It's a public footpath, isn't it?"

"Yes, and it ought to be safe. We shall have to find old Hemp another field where he can do no harm to passers-by. And so old Jane asked you to come and see her?"

And Phil laughed unsympathetically.

"She sent word that she felt very bad and was afraid she was dying, poor thing! The little girl brought me the message in the morning, but I have been so busy I couldn't leave the house till just now."

"Old Jane would have to be dramatic. Thinks that people have nothing else to do but come and listen to her complaints and gloat over her 'bad leg,' her precious possession, the joy of her old age."

"The child assured me her Grannie was dying."

"The doctor knows her little game. She often sends that little granddaughter to try to persuade him that she's dying. He makes up a bottle of liquorice water with a little quinine and rum in it and promises to look in next time he's round that way."

Ringwood raised his eyebrows.

"Do you mean to say she is not ill?"

"No worse than usual. She would be even better pleased if I would go instead of you, but she knows I'm too busy to

leave Uncle Dick. So it's no use sending for me. What are you going to do when you get there?"

"Read and pray with her, as I usually do with people who are very ill."

Again Phil laughed. He winced and looked unhappy. She continued:

"Your chief job will be to listen to her mardling. She will mardle away for half an hour or more if you've got the patience to listen. If you have a sense of humour it will amuse you. On the other hand, you may be bored stiff."

"I shall be pleased to find, after the disturbing message I had, that she is well enough to chat."

"Jane is a long way off dying yet, I can assure you. I'll bet you five shillings she lives a good ten years longer. She's only just seventy. She will see eighty, or my name is not Phil Belton."

They reached the gate of the meadow on the other side of which was Jane's cottage. About ten yards from the gate stood old Hemp. He was alone. His harem had been driven to the neat-house for the afternoon milking. It was an incident in his daily life for which he could see no reason, and he deeply resented it. He was working off his rage by stamping and pawing up the ground round him. It was destructive to the turf, which was fine upland grass.

Phil leaned over the gate, standing on the bottom rail and banged her stick on the flat side of the gate.

"Hemp! Hemp! You old scoundrel! Brrrr! Brrrr!" she growled. "He'll think I'm swearing at him as William does," she explained in an off-hand way to Ringwood. "Drop it, or I will come and lay my stick across your back!"

She shouted and scolded as William might have done. The bull recognized her voice and lifted his curly head. He trotted towards her with a kind of grunt that was not quite a bellow.

"Take care!" cried Ringwood. "He may charge the gate. He's very angry."

"So would you be if you had just lost seven wives at one fell swoop; had them taken away from you without a with-your-leave or by-your-leave."

Again she spoke to the bull, alternately scolding and coaxing him. She thrust her hand in her tunic pocket and drew out some lumps of loaf sugar, which she scattered on the grass in front of the bull. At sight of it Hemp forgot his grievance

and began to lick up the white morsels. For the moment the partners of his life were forgotten in the pleasure of another form of indulgence.

"The cows will be back by six. All the same, though I've pacified him for the moment, it won't be safe for you to cross the meadow while Hemp is alone. You must go round by the lane. I'll come part of the way with you, but I don't want to be caught by Jane. I haven't time to spare just now."

She threw a few remaining lumps of sugar to Hemp and walked on with her companion.

"Do you always carry sugar?" he asked.

"Always, and sweets as well," she replied. "The sugar is for the animals; the sweets are for the children. The best and most effectual means of appealing to all creatures, human as well as animal, is by way of the tummy."

"What does your aunt say to this robbing of her sugar-basins?"

"I buy my own sugar as well as the sweets."

"It's better than using the stick."

"That depends on the object you are dealing with. I think both are necessary. Old Hemp would be better for a good hiding. And, what's more, he'll get it, too, if he goes on tearing up the turf in that manner."

"I hope you won't attempt to punish him yourself," said Ringwood.

"Too big a job for me, but I may come and see the fun over the gate and console him after his hiding. William will leave him a bit sore, I bet! William has got a strong arm, and he will give old Hemp something to think of!"

"Is it really necessary——?" began the Rector.

"Of course it is! We must have discipline and order in the stockyard, just as it is wanted in the school and parish and in the young people's homes. George's mother will hear from Johnnie what he has been doing. Likely as not his father will give George a far better basting than I could have done. Now I am going to leave you. I must get home for my bath and dress for dinner. And don't you be taken in by old Jane and what she calls 'her mortal bad illnesses'."

She ran off, swinging her stick and making a bee-line across country for the old Hall. She jumped every hedge and ditch and vaulted the gates that obstructed her path. He watched her till a deep depression in the landscape hid her from view, a

light-hearted land-girl but not the dignified Rectoress of a parish with an annexe of a watering settlement.

Jane was standing on her doorstep ready to greet him.

"I see yer!" she cried as soon as Ringwood was within hearing. "You were with Miss Phil at the gate, alooking at old Hemp in his tantrums."

"I thought, from what your granddaughter said, that I should find you in bed, Jane."

"I ain't so bad as all that, though I'm pretty bad as it is. Instid of getting up at six o'clock, as I usually do, I laid till half-past eight. Then I got up and hollered to Polly, just as she was starting from her mother's house, to take a message to you on her way to school. Dawdling little mawther! You may be sure she was late and laid it on to me. Sit down, sir, please, and I'll show you my leg. It looks to me as if the inflammation is a spreading upwards."

"I don't think it's necessary for me to see it. You should show it to the doctor."

"He's allus in that hurry, he hain't time to look at it properly. I don't believe he notices the colour, and the never feel it to see if that's hardening."

"Cover your leg up, Jane, or you'll catch cold in it."

Very reluctantly she lowered her petticoats and hid what was to Ringwood an unnecessary display of naked flesh.

"I'm right glad that you come round by the lane, sir. That was Miss Phil's doing, I reckon. It wouldn't have been safe for you to have crossed the middar alone. That would have been a rare old masterpiece if the bull had chased you and dossed you over the hedge into my garden. Might have broken some ribs for you."

"I shouldn't have allowed him to catch me."

"The master is going to have him moved to a field where there ain't no footpath nor right of way. If the bull injured anyone here, where we've got a right of way, the master would be responsible for damages."

"I think that's only right."

"The bull ain't savage in an ordinary way. He's all right as long as he's got the cows with him. But he turns very nasty in his temper when Joe comes along and fetches the cows away. He makes as though he wanted to go with them, but Betsy couldn't do with him in the milking-shed. He'll have to larn sense."

"He's young yet, and all young things have to learn sense,

as you call it," replied the Rector, bringing his book out of his pocket, a small Prayer Book.

"William's wife tells me that Hemp ain't doing his work properly. By rights he should keep them there cows in calf regular like. But two of them, one of them is Daisy that Miss Phil sets such store by, have been dry ever so long, and Betsy the dairywoman is worried lest she should come short with her butter just when the market for it is best."

"Well, Jane, let's get to business. I didn't come to talk about cows. Tell me how it is that you don't feel so well as you did."

"Maybe it's along of a bit of pickled pork Miss Phil brought me. She often bring me a titty bit of something nice that's been left over. That pork was fat and as sweet as ever I tasted. I may have eaten a mite more than was good for me. About them cows. I hain't finished a telling you of them. I'd just like you to know. Happen you might be able to drop William a word or two of advice and tell him why old Hemp turns from Daisy as he do."

"I'm afraid I can't suggest anything," replied the embarrassed Rector. The subject was altogether out of his sphere. Jane continued her instructive mardle.

"Bulls are just like men. They have their fancies. You may put them, men I mean, in the way of nice, well-behaved gals what would make first-rate wives, and they won't look at 'em. But let one of them bold, red-haired trollops turn her eyes in their direction and, lawk, they are ready to fight to get possession of her."

"There's no accounting for tastes," said the Rector, wondering what attraction Jane in her youth had to offer a man.

"You're right there, sir. Men will always hanker after what they can't have and turn their backs on what might come easy if they tried. Miss Phil, she says William ought to tie up Daisy somewhere so as old Hemp can see her but can't get at her. That might do it. She's wonderful set on Daisy having a calf by old Hemp, is Miss Phil. She says it will be a beauty; and so it will be, both of them being true-bred Suffolks."

"A man must be allowed to choose his wife," remarked Ringwood.

"And that's just when he is most likely to show himself a fule, and what a fule he can be!" snapped Jane back at him.

"No one can compel a man to love where he has no mind to; but when he falls in love who shall stop him?" said the Rector.

"That's a true word if ever you spoke one, sir. Don't I know by my own experiences? My man would have me, though there were a lot of gals better looking than I was to choose from. When he was young he was right good company. He was a good bit older than me, and when he grew old all the talk fared to go out of him. The last year or two of his life he'd set in that chair you're a sitting on and say nawthen. Wonnerful dull company he was."

"Now, Jane, hadn't I better read to you?"

"You can if you like. I don't mind. His legs swelled terrible before he died. I said to him: 'I'm afraid, bor, you ain't for long.' 'Yar right, mor!' he'd say. And three months later he was dead. Quite quietly he went, and he didn't want no helping."

Ringwood opened his book at what he thought and hoped would prove acceptable for reading, and Jane subsided into a murmur as the sound of his voice filled her little room. After the reading he said five or six prayers that he thought were suitable. As Jane was not exactly on her death-bed—he remembered the character Phil had given her—it was not easy to make a selection.

"Lawk, you do pray beautiful!" said Jane as he closed the book. "You pray much better than old Rector. He'd lost most of his teeth, like my husband. That didn't make him the less holy, mind you; but reading and praying didn't fare to come easy to him like it do to you. Them there teeth of yours, they're your own, ain't they?"

Ringwood rose from his seat. He ignored her intimate query.

"I'm glad I have found you so much better than I expected, Jane," he said as he shook the old, claw-like hand.

"I ain't as well as I look," she said sharply. "In the night I come over all hot and cold. Last night, when that was just getting light, I sartainly thought I should be took before the sun rose. Your visit have done me a lot of good, sir. I feel as if I could finish that bit of pickled pork for my supper."

She hobbled out after him with all her old activity.

"Good-bye, Jane!" he said as he started off, feeling that his duty was done.

"Good-bye, sir. Do you keep to the lane and don't show

yourself to old Hemp till he get his cows back. The old varmint! William will have to put him up to fatten if he don't get his cows in calf regular. I've known a young bull like him keep ten cows in full profit without hurting his self. And so I told Miss Phil——"

But Ringwood was out of hearing by this time and congratulating himself on the fact. He wished from the bottom of his heart that Phil hadn't taken so violently to farming and stock-raising.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

THE harvest was over. The men on the different farms had in turn "hollered largesse" at the finish. The custom is, alas, dying out. It is a peculiar cry that notifies to their little world that the corn is safely garnered. It dates from the ancient days when Britain depended for its food on what was grown in its own fields.

The cry as raised by the men's voices is a melancholy musical intoning on one note, followed by shouts of joy. It heralds an immediate appeal to the pockets of the better classes and asks for a bestowal of a thank-offering to the men in gratitude for their efforts.

The few pounds collected are placed in the hands of the "harvest-king," the leader of the reapers, familiar figures who are vanishing from the eyes of the rising generation, driven out by the mechanical reaper and binder propelled by motor power.

The "King" divides it all among the workers. Originally it was spent in providing them with a supper of beef and beer. In Belton's case he gave the required harvest feast, as his father and grandfather had done before him. The men received their share of the money intact. It was a welcome gift. Some of it went towards the payment of the rent. If there was any over it was spent on boots for the family. Boots are always the trouble in cottage life. It seems the last straw after clothes have been paid for.

While the men regaled themselves on beef and beer at the chief public-house, thanks to the materializing of the parish room there was a substantial high tea for the women and children. Phil played an active part in the arrangement, calling on her friends for assistance in buttering slices of bread, cutting up cakes, pouring out innumerable cups of tea and handing round the good things provided.

Ringwood was drawn into it as a helper. He was the happier for finding that Phil did not think it necessary to wear her land-girl costume for the occasion. She clothed herself in her neat, grey-tweed coat and skirt that had no masculine features about it. Thus dressed, she looked far

more like a possible Rector's wife than in her breeches and tunic. He found himself "dreaming dreams" and "seeing visions" as he watched her busy among the women and children. She knew every individual present, their circumstances and their troubles. The names of the children came to her lips with a shrewd knowledge of each child's temperament.

The tea finished, Phil's band of ready helpers cleared away the cups and saucers and the trestle tables and arranged the room for the entertainment that was to follow. Again Ringwood sought her advice,

"The schoolmaster offers to give them a comic song. Shall I accept his offer and put it somewhere at the end of the programme?"

"What sort of a song is it?"

He mentioned its title. It was one of the broad comic songs of the day. There was nothing in it that was coarse or immoral. It was broad humour.

"No, no, no!" said Phil at once. "I won't have anything that they may have heard in the public-house or on the sands."

He looked amused but embarrassed.

"I don't like turning him down. It seems so ungrateful."

"I'll settle it. Leave it to me."

She was soon smiling and twisting the schoolmaster round her little finger. The Rector noted that the man responded with a pleased grin. She returned to Ringwood.

"He is going to sing 'Her name is Mary,' which will please the women just as well, and I'm going to play his accompaniment. I think I know it. If not I can vamp it. And I've told him to be ready with at least a couple of encores and to let me know what they are before he begins to sing."

"Good!"

"I am not going to allow our entertainment side of the parish room to get out of hand. They all know in the village how I treated George Banham."

"I hear he's very sorry for himself. He was too young to go to the harvest supper, and you wouldn't have him here."

"I'm glad he is aware of the situation he has created for himself," said Phil with deep satisfaction. "Where is he? What is he doing with himself?"

"His mother left him at home to take care of the house,"

She laughed.

"I believe you are sorry for him, Rector. You're much too soft hearted."

The blood rose to his brow.

"Perhaps I am," he replied in a low voice. "In some directions."

Phil turned away in blessed ignorance that she had set a man's heart throbbing. Had they been alone, he would probably have poured out his love, but, hedged in as she was by the guests of the evening, he had no opportunity to lay bare his heart.

It was the day after the harvest tea. Phil had gone to the parish room to see that the girls she had chosen as her helpers had cleaned and tidied it. Everything was spick and span and ready for the next occasion when a tea might be wanted. She had dismissed them in her usual, abrupt manner which they thoroughly understood and liked, and she was preparing to lock the door. Footsteps approaching arrested her movements. One of the girls returning for something she had forgotten. She waited in the doorway.

To her surprise, George Banham appeared looking extremely sheepish and uncomfortable.

"Hello, George! What do you want?"

"Please, miss, I'm—I'm right sorry I angered you. I didn't mean to."

He got out his little prepared speech. When once the ice was broken words flowed more easily.

"That's all right, George. I showed you your place. You won't give us any more trouble."

"That I won't, miss. My father, he gave me a rare old wallop. I've got the marks of it on my back still."

"They will remind you that our new parish room is not a gymnasium."

"I can't think how I come to carry on as I did. Did I—was any of them there chairs broken? If so I'll mend them. My dad will help me."

"I don't think you did any damage, but you would have done if I hadn't chucked you out."

"You only did what was right and proper, miss."

Again she reassured him, telling him he was forgiven, and closed the door behind her.

"There's something I want to ask you, miss. Can I help you in any way? I'll keep the boys in order while you look

after the gals. And I can lend a hand in any jobs that are too heavy for you."

Phil recognized the olive branch. She wondered if it came unprompted from George himself or if his father had sent him under threat of another hiding, to make his peace with the young miss of the hall.

"Did your father tell you to come and see me?"

"No, that he didn't. He knows nawthen about it. I come of myself. I didn't even tell mother."

"And you really mean what you say?"

"May I die——?"

"Very well!" interrupted Phil. She required no oath to assure her of his faith.

"You come along to-morrow evening. We're opening the room as a parish club. Tea from six to eight at a penny a cup. Buns at a halfpenny. I've got darts and dominoes, and you can look after the games with the schoolmaster."

"We must make a charge for them," said George.

Phil looked doubtful. She did not want to turn the room into a commercial speculation.

"If you don't, miss, the public-house people may turn nasty."

"Very well; the price shall be a halfpenny less than their rate."

"That'll do nicely," said the new hand, who was already identifying himself with the staff that was running the room.

Ringwood heard of how George Banham had been roped in by Phillis. He was more pleased than he ventured to say. After all, her drastic ways might have their advantage over his milder and more dignified methods. At any rate, it had been successful in the case of Banham's conduct, and he could not but admit that she knew how to manage his parishioners better than he did.

The summer had been different from old times. Phil was too busy helping her uncle to find time for an expedition to the Broads. The merry picnic party of which she and Hassan had been the moving spirits was nothing but a happy memory. The only member of the old crowd left to forgather was Jim Armstrong.

He was going through the mill like the rest of his kind. The office-boy period was passed. He had risen to the position of clerk and was calling himself an assistant with the rest of the lads in the office.

There had been only a fortnight's holiday, which he was obliged to take during the first half of September. Part of the time he had spent at the Old Hall, but there had been no long picnic on the Broads with a gang of happy young people, bent on getting all the joyousness that was to be squeezed out of life.

In vain Jim begged for three or four days on the water or at least a long week-end. Phil was nothing if she was not thorough. She refused to leave her uncle.

"Can't be done, old dear. You must sample the sea bathing along with the visitors."

"You'll come with me."

"Sorry, but I'm going to drive the horse-rake over the fields where the corn has been carried."

Jim had before seen his old chum mounted on the narrow seat and bumping over the unevenly cut fields, leaving long ridges of corn behind her which one of the men would presently pitch up into a waggon. The sea air blew away the town cobwebs, but the handsome young clerk sorely missed his companion in those long, morning expeditions which he had loved.

Phil managed to make an excursion to the Broads. It was only for the day, and it was on a Saturday. They returned in the evening so that Phil could be up betimes in the morning to help Betsy. She had told Betsy that in the evening of Saturday she would be absent from the milking shed. But on Sunday morning she would not fail her.

"Cows don't want no time off," commented the old woman. "They have to be stripped on Sunday same as weekday. And I can get along twice as quick if I have you to help, miss."

Phil promised to keep faith with her as she packed her picnic basket for Saturday.

"I wish I could ask Mr. Ringwood to join us," Phil said as they were starting.

"What do you want him for?" asked Jim.

"He has never seen the Broads, and it would have been a good opportunity."

"Some other time, Phil," pleaded Jim.

They called at the Rectory to leave a message from Mrs. Oakley. Ringwood had just finished breakfast.

"I wish we had room for you," said Phil.

"Saturday is a bad day with me. I couldn't have managed it," he said.

"Another time perhaps," and Phil turned away with no sign of disappointment.

"You can take him out when I'm not here—and drown him if you like," Jim concluded viciously.

She laughed.

"What's the matter with our Rector that you want him drowned? We have all taken to him very kindly."

"He's all right as the parson, I dare say," said Jim grudgingly.

"Perhaps we might picnic again this day week," remarked Phil, leaving the subject of the Rector.

"I'm afraid I must be off not later than next Friday," he said dolefully.

"Why this hurry?"

"I must spend four or five days at home with father and mother. I shan't get another holiday till Christmas, and then it will only be five days at the most. I would much rather spend the whole of my holidays with you, Phil." He said it as though he meant it.

"Now don't get sentimental, old dear, over me. We've no time for sentiment. Think of me messing about among the stock and helping Uncle Dick all I can, dressed in my land-girl suit and often covered with mud."

"That's how I love you best, Phil, and I often wish I could help you in your work."

Again she laughed; this time it was at the thought of Jim helping the vet among the piglets and calves.

"Suppose we gave you that young colt, Bell Buoy, to break in. He's our next job. How would you set about it?"

"Oh, put a saddle on his back and ride him round a field. I can ride, as you know. We often had rides together in the old days."

"Getting a saddle on Bell Buoy's back and keeping it there is a business you would never manage. I'm going to do it, however, with William's help, and I'm going to break him in."

"Don't get yourself smashed up, Phil."

"Come and have a look at our new red-polled bull, old Hemp. I want to see if he is settling down in his new quarters without losing his temper over it."

They trudged off across country. She explained the difficulty over Hemp without mincing matters.

"We had to put him in a field where there was no footpath

and right of way. There are times when he is not as good tempered as he might be."

"How's that? Do the boys tease him?"

She went into the details which had shocked the Rector when he heard them from Jane's lips. To Jim's ears they sounded commonplace and natural enough. His own father cultivated land in Lincolnshire. He had begun with stock, but he was gradually turning to vegetables and bulbs with more profit.

"And so when we discovered that it was Daisy's fault and she was having 'no truck' with old Hemp, as William called it, she was also removed and sent to the other herd. Tom, the old bull, stands no nonsense with his cows. When the time comes, he uses brute force and gives them no choice. Old Hemp will learn his job in time like old Tom and how to manage his herd."

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

ALL too soon Jim's summer holiday came to an end, the pleasant walks with Phil and her uncle round the farm in the morning; the afternoon drive on some errand prescribed by Belton; the produce of the garden or dairy to be carried into Beltonville to the greengrocer and "The Old Hall Dairy."

Since Jim liked her so well in her land-girl's outfit, she retained the breeches and tunic and made no attempt to smarten herself up with her dressmaker's latest creation in tweed with hat to match.

From the little bungalow town they drove inland with an object: to count the cattle that "had been put down to marsh" last spring; to see that the trees which were to provide "kindling"—firewood for the lighting of the fires and logs for winter use—were being prepared for the carting home as soon as the carrying of harvest was ended. Some of the root crops were in course of being pulled. They also required bringing to the yard and "clamping" where they would not be in the way. There was always something that needed the master's eye and Phil made a very good deputy for her uncle.

Mrs. Merton, of the dairy shop, greeted her warmly and would not let her go without a few words of gossip. As Phil drove away she looked after her with exclamations of alarm as the car took on speed.

"Lawk! She will kill herself one of these days," Mrs. Merton grumbled to her husband, who was busy washing the milk bottles.

"Not she!" he replied with more faith in Phil's driving than his wife possessed.

"I wonder that Mr. Jim isn't scared out of his life, a-sitting by her side."

"He knows her too well."

"That's good to see Miss Phil with Mr. Jim," continued Mrs. Merton. "He's a lot more suited to her than that foreign chap was."

"Yar right mor," assented Merton.

"And a good tidy more suited than the Rector," concluded

Mrs. Merton. "She don't care that"—Mrs. Merton snapped her bony fingers—"for his reverence."

"She ain't took with any of them yet," said Merton.

"Mr. Jim would suit her properly," replied his wife.

"He ain't got no money," remarked the old man.

"More's the pity."

"He'll have it in time and then he can axe her," said Merton hopefully.

"If she don't throw herself away first on his reverence. Mrs. Oakley, Betsy tells me, is wonderful set on Miss Phil going to the Rectory one day."

The man turned off the tap for a moment while he delivered himself of his opinion.

"If she do take his reverence, it will be a case of pull devil and pull baker with him and them there breeches of hers. He hates the sight of them."

Mrs. Merton cackled.

"He'll never get her out of them."

On the last day of Jim's visit just as Belton had finished lunch he said.

"Phil, get out your car and run up to the field where we have stacked the corn. We shan't be thrashing out till November. The stacks have been thatched. Bob Grimson the thatcher should have finished them by this time."

"Right-o! I'll go at once," she said pushing her chair back.

"Before I pay him one of us ought to see if he has done his work properly. You can do that as well as I can," added Belton.

"Come along Jim. We'll go at once. We shall be home in plenty of time for tea, and a game of lawn tennis afterwards."

Belton's eyes followed his niece as she left the room.

"Good girl!" he commented. "I find her useful at every turn, and all hands like her. They will take anything from her. She has a way with them that doesn't put their backs up."

"She has certainly picked up the work very quickly."

"Got it in her blood like the old Beltons. She can run this place almost as well as I can, and knows as much about stock as I do."

"I heard her asking you to take her to Norwich with you. She can go shopping if she likes but don't take her on the Hill."

Norwich market is not a fit place for a lady," said Mrs. Oakley.

He grunted a kind of assent which was no reply and departed for the gun room. He was aware that his sister was right. Norwich cattle-market with its frightened beasts, its swearing drovers and its rough farmers with their unpolished manners was not a fit place for a young woman, however much of a land-girl she prided herself on being.

Phil and Jim sped on their way, turning their backs to the coast with its grey sea. Together they examined the stacks. A ladder had been left leaning against one of them.

Jim in his eagerness to help "swarmed" up over the rungs. He was not a light-weight. The ladder had been lightly placed. There was no one at its foot to steady it. It gave way under his weight and gradually slipped to the ground. Jim was left clinging desperately to the withies that bound the straw of the thatch. They were being pulled out under his weight.

He shouted to Phil as he hung there. She caught up an armful of combings of the straw that the thatcher had left lying loose on the ground and flung it down beneath him. She was only just in time.

"Let yourself drop!" she shouted. "Bend your knees as you come down. Don't stiffen yourself and you'll be all right."

"I thought the ladder would be safe," cried Jim out of breath, with the jar of the fall.

"You fool! No ladder is safe unless it has got something to stay it. You should have waited for me to hold it."

Jim was apologetic. Phil looked upwards. She could see the spot where he had clutched the thatch and pulled it out while he held on for dear life as it seemed to him. If he had fallen on his back or side it would have done him no harm beyond giving him a bruise or two.

"You'll have to give the thatcher a shilling to put it right. We need not say anything to Uncle Dick. He would only laugh at you, and tell me I didn't know how to look after you. Here, help me to carry the ladder if you aren't too much damaged. I want to look at the last stack."

"What's the matter with it? Have the sparrows begun to take up their winter quarters in it?"

"I think it's only the wind. It has caught it under the eaves."

They placed the ladder in position.

"Now you stand here," said Phil. "Hold the ladder with both hands like this and put your foot on the bottom rung and stick your left out behind you to give you a purchase if you feel the ladder slipping."

He followed her directions and when she was satisfied that he had a good grip of it she ran to the top.

"Just as I thought!" she cried. "The scoundrel! He was short of binders and was too lazy to go to his house and fetch some more. I'll talk to him! We shall have to drive to his cottage to find him!"

They left the ladder at the weak point and entered Phil's car. The thatcher lived on the outskirts of the village. His father and his grandfather before him had possessed the cottage which had a large yard attached to it. The yard was required for the straw and binders and various properties needed by one of his trade.

The thatcher was just sitting down to tea. He heard the sound of her horn which was on the noisy side.

"Ahoy! Grimson!" she cried at the top of her voice. "I want you a minute."

He came, wondering what Miss Phil had to say. Before he could speak she went to the point at once.

"I've been looking at your work on those stacks. Call that thatching? I don't! I could have done it better myself."

She went into detail and explained what was wrong.

"It must be put right, and made sound before we pay your bill. There's another place on the fifth stack that wants attending to, but that's not your fault. The other is, a regular bad piece of workmanship. You know, Bob your father was never so slack over his work. He would have been ashamed of the end stack."

"I'm sorry, Miss. I was going to see to that weak place to-morrow. I was hurried."

"We don't hurry through any job on this farm. Your father was the best thatcher in the place. We could always depend on him for good work."

Bob Grimson listened to her flow of words with mixed feelings. She continued.

"That's his doing on the church, a beautiful bit of thatch. He did it twenty-five years ago. It was a picture when he'd finished, my aunt told me, and people came from a long way

to look at it. It will last another twenty-five years and be an example to you how thatching should be done."

"He used reeds for the church. I hadn't only straw for mine," said Grimson anxious to justify himself.

"In this case the thatch is only wanted for a few months. Straw is sufficient."

"Mr. Belton came and looked at the stacks——"

"I ask you, did he go up the ladder as I did? No! He only glanced at them from the road as he drove by!"

"He said——"

"I don't care what he said. You will attend to that weak place where the straw is loose enough to blow all over the field if we have any wind to catch it and rip it up. We're bound to get gales off the sea in October and we shan't be thrashing out till the end of November."

"Yes, Miss; I'll see to it; that I will; and make as good a job of it as my father would have done," replied Grimson, by this time brought under her thumb completely.

"There's a place that Mr. Jim damaged with the ladder on the fifth stack. You must mend it and fasten down the binders if you find they are loosened."

"Yes, Miss Phil."

"And I'll look at the stacks some time to-morrow afternoon. If I'm satisfied you can come up on pay-day and get your money."

"Here's a shilling to pay for the damage I did," said Jim, slipping the coin into Grimson's hand.

It more than compensated for the work involved by Jim's "accident." The dressing down that Bob had received from the voluble Phil was softened by her warm praise of the elder Grimson.

"If I be spared, one day Miss Phil shall give my work a good word same as she did the old dad's," he said to himself as he returned to his interrupted tea.

The next morning Jim was up early looking from his window at the pale yellow light of the newly-risen sun on the grey bosom of the North Sea.

They breakfasted and he had time for a ramble down to the beach. He chose the spot where they had played as children. Hassan was with them then: Hassan who had so suddenly passed out of the picture.

After an early lunch Phil took Jim to Yarmouth to catch the express to London. He sat by her side unusually silent.

She was occupied at the wheel. She drove, as usual, at the limit of speed allowed by the law, keeping her eyes on the road and running as few risks as possible.

His gaze dwelt on the figure by his side, clad in coat and skirt of the latest cut. She seemed further away from him than ever.

Poor Jim! He was desperately in love but he dared not speak.

What had he to offer? He was only a clerk in an office. He could not keep a wife on four pounds a week or even five.

Often he had been on the verge of betraying himself and opening his heart to her. But she gave him no encouragement. He bit on the words and kept a silence that was pain and grief to him.

Then there was that parson fellow. Jim was not blind. He could see what was lost to Phil's comprehension. The Rector was always running to her for help in the parish. He chose the afternoon hours when Phil had exchanged her land-girl's dress for the neat tweed costume that met with Ringwood's warm approval. He seemed to be always butting in.

Just as Jim and Phil had taken up their rackets and were making their way to the courts, there was that black-coated fellow demanding help with a mother's meeting or a lecture on church history for the girls. Couldn't he manage his women and children without the presence of Phil on the platform?

The Rector was falling in love just as desperately as he was himself and it would be the Rector who would win.

It comforted Jim more than a little to note a complete absence of any symptoms of a sentimental response on the part of Phil. She was as hard as nails with respect to lovers. Her affections were bestowed on her women and girls, the pigs, horses and cows, the sheep and lambs and occupants of her hen-houses and fowl-runs.

Ringwood might turn a disapproving eye upon her when he encountered her in her land-girl's dress but he could not hide the softening of his expression when he found himself in her presence.

Jim knew what it meant, and as he was leaving her for he knew not how long, his heart failed him at the thought of the opportunities that would fall to the lot of his rival during his own absence.

He clasped Phil's well-kept little hand in his as she stood

at the door of the railway carriage. If fingers could speak what a wealth of love his would have expressed.

"Good-bye, old dear!" she cried. "See you again at Christmas."

She hurried away before the train had actually started. There were those stacks to see on her way home. She was thinking more of Bob Grimson's shortcomings than of good old Jim's virtues.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

CHRISTMAS came and passed with an attempt at the usual festivities. As far as the parish was concerned they were much the same. A tea for the women; a Christmas tree for the children; a supper for the men.

The house party at the old Hall had never been so quiet. Joan and her husband were still in India. Hassan had disappeared off the scenes like an unwanted ghost which he very much resembled. Jim Armstrong was unable to pay a visit to Norfolk.

Only five days' holiday were allowed to the clerks of Jim's office. His sister was to be married the day after Christmas Day, and his presence was required at the old home. He had neither the time nor the cash to spare to run down into Norfolk for even one night. It was with a very sore heart that he refused Phil's invitation.

She accepted his decision placidly. Each day that passed saw her more absorbed in the new farm life to which she had so readily put her hand. She had promised to fulfil all the duties that would be expected from an articled pupil, and she had kept faith with her Uncle, throwing herself heart and soul into it, to Belton's great satisfaction.

He impressed on her from the very beginning that it was the master's eye that was mostly needed in her business. There was no necessity to put her hand to manual work. The men could do that. But she must know how it should be done and learn the supervision of it down to the smallest detail. Belton could not have had a more expert or willing pupil.

All the same, Phil was never backward in lending a hand wherever it was needed. She did not attempt to pitch a load of hay, but she could drive a horse-rake over a cut field or the stubble after the reaper had done its work.

It was early in January, just after the New Year. Phil had been up long before daylight and was with Betsy in the milking-shed. The cows were milked by machinery, and all the latest gadgets to accelerate the work had been introduced.

The cows came as usual to the milking-shed to have their

milk drawn. It was the yard boy's business to bring them in and stall them in their proper places.

On this particular morning Joe looked into the milking-shed as they were in the middle of the work. Caroline, one of the big girls, had left school to come into the dairy under Betsy's eye. She caught sight of Joe's white, agitated face and drew Phil's attention to his presence.

"Hello, Joe! What's wrong?" asked Phil.

"Them there bulls!"

Before he could get any further with his slow speech, William appeared. Phil turned to him for elucidation.

"Go and fetch them pitchforks," he said angrily to the lad, giving him a warning cut across the back with his stick.

Joe fled to the barn where the forks were kept.

"What's the matter with the bulls?" asked Phil.

"They're having it out through the gate, the old 'un and the young 'un, the warmints!" William replied. "Half the world is knaves, and half is fules. I can do with a knave—but damn a fule like Joe."

Joe brought the pitchforks. Phil armed herself with one. Leaving Betsy to get on with Caroline's aid, she joined William, who was not sorry to have additional help.

As they hurried toward the field where the bulls were confronting each other, one on each side of the gate, William explained the situation.

"That fule Joe, when he called up the cows, didn't fasten the gates properly. Thought they'd do as they were till he drove the cows back again. Hemp got out and made his way to old Tom's field. I happened to see 'em, one on each side of the gate. They were a-grumbling and trying to toss each other through the gate. They'll have it in bits if we don't drive 'em off."

"I don't see why they should want to fight," remarked Phil. "They've each got their herd of cows."

"It's all along of that there Daisy, the little muck! I thought she'd settle down all right with the old bull. But, dall me, if she didn't begin to hanker after the young 'un as soon as she was parted from him. She was always a-shoving her head over the fence and bellowing for him."

They reached the field. Both bulls were showing signs of fight, stamping their feet and lowering their heads. Every now and then they butted into the gate, which was rapidly being destroyed.

"Look at that! Drat them beasts! That was a new gate last June," said William, and he began to growl at them like a savage dog.

They recognized his voice and stopped their belligerent operations. They turned and looked at him and his pitchforks. Old Tom had experienced encounters with the formidable weapons of the farm. He had no wish to try conclusions with his three assailants. He knew he would get the worst of it, with a sore back into the bargain. He drew away and retired to a spot where the grass was still green and had not been trampled to soft mud.

Hemp was inclined to resist authority, but a prod or two from a pitchfork brought him to his senses. He turned away from the gate and began to retrace his steps to the further entrance leading into his own field, which Joe had left open.

"You go and fetch the cows, you dratted young fule!" said William to Joe.

The lad was glad to escape the man's sharp tongue. The words William used had the sound of curses that went home, although they were rendered comparatively inoffensive by his mispronunciation.

"I'll go and lead up Daisy," volunteered Phil. Daisy was to be given no choice this time.

"Bring her round by the gate on the other side of the field, miss. Then she won't see old Tom. We'll put her with the young bull this time, and if that's a miss-fire and ain't no good she shall be fattened for next Christmas market."

He hurried after Hemp, who was quietly feeding on his way to his own field. A touch now and then of William's pitchfork kept him on the move till he was safely penned in his special domain. There was the width of an empty meadow between him and old Tom, and the presence of the cows would bring peace.

The rearrangement was effected, the fickle Daisy making no objection.

"Now, be good, Daisy dear!" said Phil as she waited for William to make the gates secure. "I don't wish to eat you as prime beef. I want your milk for my butter."

William heard her appeal to her favourite cow.

"She's that flighty," he growled, "and light in her behaviour that I doubt if she will ever make a good milker. Just like some gals I've known, always got their eyes astray."

They only find themselves the worse off in the end and get left with the bad boys of the place."

It was a wet spring, but there were occasional fine days which were so to speak snatched at to get certain things done.

On a bright morning in April Belton reminded Phil that they had yet to break in the colt.

"It's time to get the saddle on his back," said Belton.

"Let's take him in hand this very morning," replied Phil in ready response.

She had already given him a name. Bell Buoy he was called. He was not sent to the breakers. The old-fashioned method of breaking horses still prevailed on the old Hall farm. William superintended, whilst Belton looked on. The master brought his shooting stool and sat under the lee of the fence, where he was protected from the east wind.

Bell Buoy was first lunged—driven round in a circle on a long leash in a grass meadow where, if he lost his temper and threw himself about he could do nothing more than cover himself with mud and perspiration. Under the lash of a carter's whip that had an intimidating crack William sent him round and round till he was splashed with mud, and dripping. When he was thoroughly blown, Bell Buoy was brought to a standstill. He was up to his fetlocks in the soft soil that his hoofs had churned up.

While recovering his wind and collecting his bewildered senses after the amazing treatment he had received, a saddle was slipped along his back till it was in position. Without realizing all the ills that were befalling him, his tail was gently pulled through the crupper and the girths buckled.

Phil with a handful of sugar and soft, treacherous words was beguiling him to eat it. At a sign, William gave her a leg up and she was in the saddle.

The struggle began and continued until Bell Buoy came to his senses. All at once he seemed to connect the strange creature astride on his back with his benefactor of the sugar. He submitted and cantered round the meadow. He found the new conditions preferable to that heartbreaking lungeing, under the lash of the carter's whip.

Phil soon had her steed well in hand and responsive to the snaffle as well as the pressure of her knee. The training was continued every morning and sometimes in the afternoon.

In a week's time she had put Bell Buoy over his first hurdles, and Belton was well satisfied with horse and rider.

At this period Ringwood was not particularly happy over his own state of mind. He was becoming conscious that the day on which he did not happen to encounter Phil was a blank.

No matter what he might be doing, he found himself on the alert to catch sight of her. It might be that she was walking in the village, or driving into Beltonville. Or she was somewhere about among the pigs or cows or sheep with her uncle. The Rector was too busy to join her as a rule, wherever she was, or do more than say good morning if they happened to meet after his early morning service.

From a distance he had seen the breaking in of Bell Buoy. He had strongly disapproved. It was not a fit job for a girl like Phil to be grappling with a half-broken colt. However, he dared not speak. To remonstrate with Phil herself would only increase her desire to do as she thought best. To speak to Belton was almost as ineffectual. Belton had such faith in his niece's capabilities that other people's opinion, even Mrs. Oakley's, went for nothing.

A week later Ringwood plucked up his courage and joined Belton as Phil was putting Bell Buoy through his paces. William's presence was no longer required. The horse's education had passed the lungeing stage and was now taking shape on the roads. But they had not yet dispensed with the preliminary gallop over the course in the meadow. The gallop ended with practice over the furze-topped hurdles, supposed to represent the hedges which, as a hunter, Bell Buoy would have to face. After a breather he would be introduced to the motor traffic in Beltonville and perhaps taken down to the sea to wet his legs.

"The colt is coming along wonderfully," said Belton as the Rector bade him good morning.

"Couldn't Joe do the rough work?" Ringwood ventured to say.

"What, that heavy handed fool! He would ruin a horse's mouth in an hour. Phil has the lightest hand I have ever known. And yet it is as firm as a man's. A good hand on a horse's mouth is a gift. It can't be taught. It is marvellous how a rider can communicate through the reins his own quiet confidence. Phil!" shouted Belton as she came up to them. "Put him over the hurdles."

She turned back with a smile and took the hurdles all down the course. Suddenly Bell Buoy slipped as he was about to

take off at the last hurdle. He stopped dead and saved himself. Phil was not so lucky. Taken by surprise, she came over his head, turned a somersault and fell in the churned mud of the course on her back. She still retained the reins in her hand.

Ringwood, with an exclamation of dismay, ran forward. Phil was on her feet before he could reach her and laughing at the expression of concern that his face wore. She was plastered from head to foot with the sandy clay of the light soil. A daub of it stained her nose and cheek.

"Are you hurt?" he asked.

"Not a bit! Bell Buoy pecked as he took the last hurdle. I ought to have given him a reminder with the whip to lift his feet and mind his steps."

She led her mount to the spot where Belton was sitting. He rose from his shooting stick.

"I'm going to look at those fields we have put down for hay. They'll want bush-harrowing. I have got a man I can spare just now off the land."

"I'll do it for you, Uncle," cried Phil. "I can take it in hand to-morrow morning. Bell Buoy can go out in the afternoon."

Her uncle looked her over with a slow smile.

"It's time you went home and had a bath and a change. You're a fine figure of fun with all that mud on you."

"It wasn't Bell Buoy's fault. It was my careless handling of him. He's coming on splendidly. Hardly wants any breaking in at all. He'll be as good a hunter as his mother is," said Phil, jealous for the character of her mount.

"And his sire," added Belton as he went on his way.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

RINGWOOD prepared to go his ways like the rest of the world. He did not hurry himself.

"Are you mounting again?" he asked.

"No, I want a chat with you. Walk with me to the Old Hall."

With a quickening of the pulse he accepted her invitation. They fell into step. The rein was hanging over her arm. Bell Buoy followed, thrusting his velvety nose at the pocket of her tunic where she kept the sugar.

"Uncle Dick and Aunt Olive are going to Norwich for a day's shopping next Monday. I shall have the afternoon to myself. This is Thursday. If you are free on Monday, I thought we might go to the Broads. You have never yet been. I hear that the floods have subsided and the water is looking lovely."

"If you can spare the time, I should be delighted."

"I shall be obliged to go whether you come or not. I must see Allen who has charge of *The Cat*."

"*The Cat!*"

"My house-boat. I am afraid I shall not be able to take her out this summer. I shall be too busy. But she must be kept trim and in order. We can use the dinghy for rowing on Monday."

They reached the Old Hall. Phil took Bell Buoy straight to the stable. They met William in the stable-yard. He stared at Phil and a slow smile spread over his rugged face.

"To look at you, miss, you've had a fall. You must have come a rare old swattiker!"

"My fault. It wasn't the colt's fault. He was tired and I didn't lift him properly over the last hurdle."

William led the horse away. She turned to the Rector and continued:

"I will write to Allen who has charge of the boat and tell him we are coming. It is not far from Wroxham. I'll drive you over to the wharf where *The Cat* is lying. I'm afraid she badly needs a coat of paint. That's a job Jim and I used to do together. I haven't time for it now. Allen must do

up the boat properly. If I don't use it myself, there are other people glad to have the loan of it. I'll call for you at two o'clock sharp after an early lunch on Monday. That's your slack day, isn't it?"

"I won't forget."

Was it likely? A whole afternoon with Phil to himself!

"There's a moon," continued Phil. "If the weather is decent we may be a little late. Tell Mrs. Pearce you will be home to supper between nine and ten."

In her absence the post had brought a letter for Phil. She opened it. It was from Jim to say that he was being transferred by his firm from the head office in London to a Branch which was being opened in Manchester.

The firm had hitherto been content to employ an agency there. The time had come when the agency had been found inadequate for their business and it was deemed advisable to open a Branch. Jim was to be second in the new office with two clerks under him. It was for Jim and his superior to work the venture up and make it a success.

He explained that he ought to consider himself lucky, as it meant promotion. It was more or less a position of trust, although he was not the head. He was to draw an extra fifty pounds a year, which was a consideration in addition to raising him above the status of the ordinary clerk.

But it had its disadvantages. These affected him strongly. One of the conditions attached to the new move concerned his summer holiday. As it was a new venture, he would have to relinquish the usual fortnight granted in August. All he could hope to have was a long week-end in which the August Bank Holiday would be included. At the utmost it would be from the Thursday evening to the following Tuesday. If he came South he would be obliged to go to Lincolnshire to see his parents. All hope of a trip on the Broads such as he had enjoyed in the summer before must be given up.

Then followed a long lament that went to Phil's heart. He hated the town. London had been bad enough. Manchester would be worse. He loathed the confinement to the office and the monotony of desk work.

He had done his best to get out of it and had begged his father to allow him to join his elder brother on the bulb farm.

He was informed that there was no room for a third. His father still took an active lead in the management and his brother made an able assistant. Unless they opened out more

land a second assistant was not needed. And there was no extra land to be had since the bulb cultivation had been introduced. Jim was strongly recommended to stay where he was and make the best of his opportunities, which from all accounts seemed to be promising.

Phil gave the letter to Mrs. Oakley to read.

"Poor old Jim!" said her aunt as she returned it. "I'm more sorry for him than I can express," and she spoke from the bottom of her heart.

"It means good-bye to all of us down here. Goodness knows when we shall see him again," remarked Phil with concern.

"You must write and console him. Don't lose touch with Jim."

Phil was not a good correspondent at any time.

"Console him!" she cried. "Impossible! You might as well shut me up within the four walls of the parish pound and try to console me for my loss of liberty with words. I shall not be surprised if Jim frets himself ill."

"I always thought it possible that Hassan might send for him some day and find him some appointment out in India," said Mrs. Oakley.

"Jim wouldn't go even if he offered him something that doubled his present salary."

"I know India is not considered the 'catch' it used to be for the merchant in the old days," said Mrs. Oakley.

"His father ought to make room for him on the bulb farm," said Phil with a touch of indignation in her voice. "There must be office work in connection with it which he could take off his brother's hands."

"Then we shan't see him here this coming summer," remarked Mrs. Oakley. "I suppose he couldn't run down just to say good-bye before he goes to Manchester."

"Not a chance of it! You see, he says that he is off the day after to-morrow. The firm is evidently in a hurry to get it all fixed up and Jim is entirely at their service. They haven't given him decent time to pack up his traps. I call it rather a shame."

On the following Monday Phil saw her uncle and aunt off to Norwich, where they intended to lunch. Belton had at last given up his old mail phaeton and fast-trotting mare and had started a car with a reliable chauffeur. Although he would not admit it, the change suited him in many ways. It saved

both time and fatigue. He had to get used to the increased pace at which the car went. But it was not long before he gained confidence in his driver. When once this had come, he fully appreciated the change.

After Phil had seen them go she changed into a tweed skirt and coat suitable for boating. She lunched by herself and got out her car. She pulled up punctually to the minute at the rectory door. Ringwood was ready and at the sound of her horn he appeared in the doorway.

"Where's your greatcoat?" she asked, seeing him in his thin, black suit.

"Shall I want it?"

"Rather! It's bound to be cold on the water at this time of the year."

It was not too warm driving through the air when they left the shelter of the leafy lanes and reached the marsh land.

Allen met them on the wharf where they left the car. They spent some time inspecting *The Cat*. She was lying at her moorings, looking quite ready to be taken out on a summer trip. What memories the sight of the boat brought back to Phil!—Hassan, Jim, Joan and Lawrence and a number of young friends belonging to the neighbourhood. Many of them were dispersed and could never gather together again. Still, if she was so minded, she might muster round her a happy party for *The Cat*.

She gave Allen her orders and left him with the impression that she would be there in the summer once more, all being well, although she had not much hope of getting away from the farm and Uncle Dick.

"We will have a row on the broad," she said to Ringwood. "And come back to the inn for a high tea at six o'clock. You won't mind having afternoon tea a little late. We must have a substantial meal before we start for the long drive home."

He was quite ready to fall in with anything she liked to propose. He was taking a holiday for once in a way and meant to enjoy it.

"Have you had many visitors?" she asked Allen.

"None, Miss Phil. It's too early yet for them."

"So much the better. We shall have the place to ourselves. Is *The Kitten* ready?" It was the name of the dinghy.

"She's spick and span. I gave her a coating of paint as soon as the frost went. My wife has aired the cushions and

washed the covers. I think you will be pleased with the little craft."

Allen took a pride in his work. He had a fleet of boats of all kinds and sizes in his charge. Phil was one of his most valued customers, and it was with much gratification that he received a visit from her. He brought up *The Kitten*, drawing the dinghy to the steps of the staith.

"Come along, Rector!" cried Phil.

"Am I to row?" he asked with a sudden misgiving. It was long since he had handled an oar.

"No, I'll do the sculling and take you to the different points I want you to see. Can you steer?"

"I think so," he said modestly.

"You boated at Cambridge, didn't you?"

"Very little. I took up cricket. You can't do both. You must choose between the two. I thought cricket would be more useful than the other in my future work."

He hesitated in stepping into the boat. She gave him her hand while Allen pulled the dinghy close in to the steps.

"Steady on!" she cried. "Put your right foot firmly down in the middle and keep your balance."

As soon as they were seated and she had put out her sculls, Allen gave the dinghy a steady push and sent it adrift. The water was clear and limpid after its winter rest from the drainage of the fleet of summer boats. The air seemed to be purified as well. The scene was a joy to Phil, a lover of the country. Even though she was a land-girl belonging to the uplands, she revelled in the long stretches of water spreading out in broad silvery streaks to the distant shore of reed-bed and coarse sedge.

Ringwood brought out of his top-coat pocket a warm pair of gloves and pulled them on.

"Cold, Rector?"

She looked at him with curiosity. Was he really enjoying himself or was he wishing himself back by his study fire? It was useless to inquire. He could not do otherwise than assure her that he was happy and pleased to be out with her.

"My hands are a little chilly from holding the tiller ropes," he replied.

"When we land I'll take you for a walk before tea which will set your blood circulating. Look at those reeds. A fine crop for the reed-cutters."

She explained how the reed-beds were cultivated and when

they were fit for harvesting. He asked what they were used for. She described the various uses to which they were put.

"They must be cut at the waxing of the moon," she said. "It must be some days before the full. They must be cut well below the water. An inch below is worth three inches above. They cut them with sharp, long-handled sickles and it takes a man strong in the arm and wrist to do it."

"Isn't the belief about the moon a bit of country superstition?" he asked.

"Superstition or not, the men won't cut them under any other conditions. I like their old beliefs. It is not easy to dig out their superstitions; they are very deeply rooted. No one can say when they originated, but the fact remains that most of them are wonderfully correct."

She rowed a few strokes to bring the boat close to the fringe of reed. A flight of sedge warblers rose into the air and settled down again, their warbling changed into chirrups of alarm.

"Look at the birds, the little dears! They are the sparrows of the reed-beds. They have already built their nests among the reeds."

Another five minutes of strenuous sculling brought them to grassy banks where an old willow hung over the water here and there. She pointed out one with a split trunk that was gradually dropping into a watery grave.

"We call that particular tree Old John's tree. It marks the spot where a tragedy happened years ago which is still remembered. The tree is very handy for tying up a boat if one wants a rest from rowing. There's a firm landing-place on the bank which is useful."

"Who was Old John?"

"A waterman, clever at catching eels and flight shooting. He could always supply you with plovers' eggs in season and wild fowl."

"What was the tragedy connected with him?"

"He was drowned under that tree. No one ever found out how he came by his death. He could swim like a fish, but the village had its suspicion."

"Was he drunk?"

"They said not. When he left the inn where we are going to have tea he was perfectly sober. And he had no liquor on him, so he couldn't have been taking any out on the marsh. He kept one of his eel-boxes in the water under the tree. It

is supposed that he fell into the broad while he was trying to pull the box out. He had received an order for three pounds of eels."

"The bank gave way and let him fall in, I suppose."

"There was no sign of a breakaway."

"How did the people of the village account for it?"

"They said he was murdered by his wife, Molly. She was an ill-tempered woman. She always said she would 'do' for him as soon as the last of her girls left the old home. Eliza went into service on one of the farms. After the girl departed, John and Molly led a worse cat-and-dog life than ever. One moonlight night when he was after the three pounds of eels that were ordered, Molly followed him without his seeing her. She caught him by the collar of his old jacket and before he could twist himself out of her strong grip he was in the water. It is deep just at that spot, but he could easily have saved himself and climbed out of the water helping himself by the branches of the tree which hung low. But she wouldn't let him get out. John kept an eel-prick standing up against the trunk of the tree. You know what a prick is?"

"I've seen the thing. Rather more unpleasant than a pitchfork."

"A good deal worse at its business end. Molly drove at him every time he approached the bank. The prick caught in his clothes and she held him down until he was dead. Dreadful old hag! Fancy watching the bubbles come up till the man was drowned!"

"Was it proved against her?"

"They couldn't get evidence enough. Molly declared that she ran out of her house only when she heard his cries for help. She swore that she never touched the eel-prick. When it was pointed out to her that he was an expert swimmer, she vowed that it was the water-weeds that clogged his feet and prevented him from getting out."

"Where was the eel-prick when the rescue party came?"

"Standing against the tree where John kept it."

"Was it wet?"

"No one had the sense to notice its condition. It was seized hastily and used as a possible means of lifting him to the surface. Anyway, they couldn't get evidence enough to convict her. They say she is paying for it now."

"How do they make that out?" he asked.

"She died a year later and ever since then she has been

obliged to commit her ghastly crime again a few nights before the full moon. They keep the eel-prick standing there on purpose for her to use. If it isn't there, she will shriek the parish awake, they say, and keep everyone shivering till daylight. John and his wife go through that awful scene, he imploring her to help him out, she jabbing at him with the eel-prick till he screams for mercy again and again."

"You don't believe such nonsense, do you?"

"I should like to believe it, only I know too much: the cry of the screech-owl that hovers over the place in search of water-rats, the squawk of the heron, the scream of the gulls and other birds flying in from the sea. Then there are the sucking noises in the mud made by the eels and big fresh-water fish, the squeak of the rats. The night is as full of strange noises as the day. It is curious that the marsh birds cry and wail just as you might imagine lost souls would do if they were allowed to wander. I have often listened to them when I have been staying on board *The Cat*."

Ringwood remained silent. This marsh land was a new world to him of which he knew nothing. It has its mysteries. Only those who live in their midst recognize them. Few can solve them. And a stranger has no love for a world that he does not understand.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

IT was colder on the water than on land. The wind blew over the flats that lay between the broad and the sea with no shelter to break its force. It came from the north-east.

At five o'clock they abandoned the dinghy and gave it back into Allen's charge. They started for the walk promised by Phil. The exercise stirred their circulation and warmed them.

Phil explained the geography of the country and pointed out the direction in which Blickling Hall lay. It was too far off for them to see it.

"Ann Bullen lived there. I can't say that we are particularly proud of her," said Phil. "Bullens may still be found in East Anglia, but they do not claim relationship with the lady of history."

Phil chose a path that took them along the bank of a river that emptied itself into the broad. Marshes and long rows of willows stretched before them into the distance where the uplands began.

The path was not good after the winter rains and floods, and Phil led her companion back to the staith. Some roughly-made seats were placed under the lee of a wall that separated the landing-place from the marsh. They had the place to themselves. In another three months it would be thronged with parties of boating people. Allen's hands would then be more than full. Mrs. Allen would be coining money by the sale of loaves of bread, bottles of milk, rashers of bacon, to say nothing of fresh vegetables and fruit all ready for cooking on the primus stoves of the house-boats and barges.

Phil's eyes were upon the water. She had detected a pair of coots fussing about a floating nest in the reeds. Ringwood's dwelt on the figure by his side. He had no thought for anything else. Words rushed to his lips which refused to be silenced.

"Phil! Phil!" he said softly. "Will you marry me?"

The momentous question could not be held back any longer. In her surprise she actually made a movement that was very like a start. She turned on him and said:

"Rector! what are you talking about? I am not marrying anyone."

"But some day you must marry."

"Not at all! Look at Uncle Dick! He has done without a wife and he is over fifty. I am going to be like him, single and devoted to the farm. I am virtually his articted pupil. He has taken me on for the usual two years."

"But you haven't signed any agreement."

"Not actually, but I have given him my word that I will stay on with him for that period, possibly longer. What has put this nonsense into your head, wanting to marry me?"

Then came the old story of love and devotion, admiration and appreciation for the only girl he had ever met whom he wanted to marry. His confession was not free from a certain self-consideration. He was not pouring forth his passion wholeheartedly, as though shaken to his very depths. She had listened to Hassan's declaration of his love when he had let himself go; and though the Oriental had never made a deep impression on Phil's youthful affections, it had been more impressive than the words to which she was listening now.

In Hassan's case she had been more in love with the romance of it all than the man. She had determined to marry the handsome young foreigner because it appealed to her love of adventure. The opposition she had met with had only added a zest to the affair and had made her obstinate in wishing to carry it through. Hence the discovery that he was already as good as married served only to hurt her pride.

Ringwood's proposal contained no element of romance. It was commonplace with no attraction from Phil's point of view, and offered nothing in the way of adventure. All the help that he needed in the parish she was already giving him except in the matter of attendance at his services. These she definitely and firmly refused to be present at. They interfered with her duties on the farm.

Why should the Rector want to alter their relationship and disturb the happy life she was leading under her uncle's tuition?

She thought of the uncles and aunt. Mrs. Oakley would doubtless be very pleased. It would be a much more suitable match for her niece than the Muhammadan would have been. Uncle Harry, placid and easy-going, would agree with his wife, but Uncle Dick would be a different proposition altogether. He might make all sorts of objections. They

would be of a selfish character. What would he do if he was deprived of Phil's assistance upon which he was already learning to rely? As these thoughts crowded in upon her, she scarcely heard what the new lover by her side was saying. He broke off in his protestations to repeat the momentous question:

"Phil darling, will you marry me? Will you be my wife?"

He took her hand in his. All his clerical life he had repressed his emotions. Now he ventured to open the flood-gates, but there still remained a curious restraint, a consciousness that he was treading on ground that had hitherto been forbidden. Was he doing right in letting himself go in this way?

"Give me time to get my breath, Rector!" cried Phil, too good-natured to follow the dictates of common sense which were to refuse him on the spot. A kind of pity took possession of her. She must let him down gently if it was to be a refusal.

"Take all the time you like, little darling, only let it be 'yes' at the end of it."

"I can't give you an answer straight away. I shall have to talk this over with the uncles and aunt. After my misfire with Hassan, I agreed with them that I was too young to be anything but a land-girl for some years to come."

"But this is not a matter for the family to decide. It rests between you and me," he pleaded.

"Do you know how old I am?"

"Somewhere in the twenties," he said tentatively.

"Wrong! I am still in my 'teens."

"You look older."

"I don't feel older now that I have taken up this work."

"Phil, give me a chance. Don't turn me down. Talk it over, if you like, with your aunt."

He knew that Mrs. Oakley would be on his side. He slipped an arm round her waist and drew her closer.

"Pity you can't marry Aunt Olive. If it wasn't for Uncle Harry being in the way, she would suit you far better than I should."

For answer he pulled her to him and took his first kiss. It was gentle, almost apologetic.

Phil was not without experience in the art of kissing. Quite unconsciously, like a child, she returned it when she felt his lips on hers.

The blood leaped in his veins. Then she drew away from

him. Allen was about the place. It was just six o'clock and he would be coming presently to summon them to tea. She had no wish to be caught by the man in anything that looked like "being courted," as he would put it when he told his wife.

"You kiss nicely," she said with childish simplicity and a complete absence of self-consciousness.

He gave a short laugh. The remark checked any further attempts on his part at love-making. Allen summoned them into his wife's comfortable parlour, where an ample meal was spread. They were quite ready for it. The keen air on the water had made them hungry.

The question he had asked remained unanswered. He had the consolation of the assurance that he had not been refused. He might still plead his suit with renewed efforts at the next opportunity.

They did not linger after they had done justice to Mrs. Allen's excellent high tea. There was the drive home before them. The evening was drawing in and the sun was low on the horizon before they started the car. The traffic on the road was slight at this time of the year. A moon in its second quarter was flooding the landscape with light, and Phil's ears could distinguish the cry of a marsh-bird once or twice as it flew homing late over their heads. As the car drew up at the rectory she said:

"Well, Rector! I hope I have given you a good impression of my beloved broad-land."

"I have enjoyed my afternoon amazingly. But—but——"

"Was there a fly in the ointment?" she asked with a smile.

"You know that I had to miss evensong, to my great regret."

"And disappoint—no, give a holiday to two old pensioners. I can safely say that they would be rather pleased than otherwise."

"I knew that Mrs. Oakley would not be home from Norwich in time to attend the service, so for once in a way I didn't mind closing the church. But I mustn't do it again."

"And I left Betsy to manage the dairy by herself with only Caroline to help. So we may consider that we have played truant this afternoon. Good night, Rector."

"Phil, my name is Reginald."

"A mouthful. I much prefer Rector."

He left it at that.

"May I come and see you to-morrow morning after matins?"

"I shall be desperately busy with the lambs. Three or four of them have to be bottle-fed, and I want to get them penned up with their mothers into a more sheltered place than the one they are occupying just now. It's too cold for them and they are too much exposed to this east wind."

"Perhaps after lunch will suit you better."

"I shall have to get away directly lunch is over to deliver a consignment of dairy and garden stuff in Beltonville, butter, eggs, early rhubarb and lettuces."

"I thought you had arranged all the deliveries by lorry," he replied, disappointed.

"The lorry is going to Yarmouth. This is a small quantity just to keep things going. There's been a run on the supplies caused by the Easter visitors." Then she took pity on him.

"Come to tea. I shall be back by then, and I shall be out of my morning kit which you dislike so much."

"Clothed and in your right mind, I hope. I want to discuss——"

She interrupted him with a light laugh.

"All right, I'll put them all wise on the subject this evening."

"Will you send me a few lines in the morning just to give me my answer?"

"Shan't have time. I don't envy you your interview with Uncle Dick. I shall leave you to fight it out between you. But please understand that I am not going to play him false. I am as fond of Uncle Dick as I shall ever be of you, old dear. It's a pity I can't marry him!"

Again her happy laugh rang out at the expression on his face as he listened to her careless words. She drove away, leaving Ringwood to the enjoyment of "love's young dream."

Phil by the waterside or in the dinghy all to himself was one thing. With Uncle Dick behind her urging his claims, it was quite another. He watched her out of sight and turned dejectedly into the rectory. However, long years of rigid self-discipline had left him master of himself. He had one consoling thought. She had not rejected him.

As Phil drove up to the garage, the housemaid met her with the information that the master and Mrs. Oakley had returned safely from Norwich and supper was on the table. She also

mentioned incidentally that one of the new-born lambs had been brought to the house by the shepherd.

"Cook has taken charge of it, miss. She has got it in the kitchen and covered it up with a bit of house-flannel. The shepherd asked if you would give it a bottle of milk before you go to bed."

"Is it going to die?" asked Phil anxiously.

"The shepherd wasn't sure. He thought that if anyone could keep it alive, it would be you, miss."

All thought of the Rector was banished from Phil's mind by the maid's information. She could only think of the frail little creature that had been committed to her care.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

THE scented air of the old drawing-room seemed to hold a welcome in it as Ringwood was shown in. Freesias, hyacinths and violets responded to the warmth of the log fire that burnt in the old-fashioned grate. The aroma of freshly-made tea mingled with the scent of the spring flowers.

The family had already assembled and Mrs. Oakley had taken her usual place before the tea-tray. She rose from her chair and hurried towards the visitor with both hands extended. She seized his with a gesture that expressed more than words.

Her husband also advanced to meet Ringwood. His greeting, although not so demonstrative as his wife's, was unmistakably friendly.

Belton smiled and held out a hand, saying as he did so:

"Well, Rector, do you really expect me to aid and abet you in this design of yours?"

"Design?" Ringwood repeated with a puzzled expression. "Oh! do you mean in my wanting a wife and having an eye on your niece?"

"Of crimping my assistant. She's the most useful hand I have on the estate," replied Belton, turning his attention back to the excellent fare set before him.

"I hope to win her," answered Ringwood warmly. "But, to tell you the truth, she hasn't given me a direct reply to my proposal yet."

"You'll get it all right in time."

"She has told me that I may consider you, Mr. Belton, as my chief rival, my only rival. You don't look very formidable," he concluded with a smile, as his eyes rested on the stout elderly man before him.

Mrs. Oakley laughed happily. She could not hide her satisfaction at the thought of Phil making such a good match. From her point of view, it seemed all that could be desired.

Oakley was not altogether on his wife's side. He gave his opinion without hesitation.

"Phil is much more suited to be a farmer's wife than the

wife of a padre. She loves the work that she is doing so well under Dick's guidance. She has got it in her blood."

"I don't see why she should not give it up, exchange it for other work equally important," objected Mrs. Oakley. "She could devote herself entirely to parish work, knowing the people as she does, which would be much more suitable than tramping after her uncle over the estate in all weathers."

"That is just what I hope to persuade her to do," said Ringwood, entirely at one with his hostess. "She loves the parish work. The people are devoted to her. It is wonderful what an influence she has over the boys and girls."

"You will have a task to get her away from the cows," remarked Belton. "Have you any decent sheds fit to house stock behind the rectory?"

"There is the old tithe barn and nearer the house are some stables and the usual outbuildings that are to be found on glebe land."

"Before you know where you are, she'll be starting a dairy and will be borrowing my red-polled bull, Old Hemp. I have already made her a present of Daisy, the red-polled cow," and Belton chuckled at the vision that came before his eyes.

"Where is Phil, by the by?" asked Oakley. "Why doesn't she come in and help with the tea and cakes?"

He was doing the honours and feeling that it was not really his business.

"She was in the dairy when I passed on my way into the house," said Belton, who never by any chance used the front door.

"Does she know that Mr. Ringwood is here?" asked Mrs. Oakley.

"She heard the front-door bell when he rang, because she said, 'Oh, dash! Visitors!' I think she had forgotten all about you, Rector. Did you tell her you were coming?" asked Belton.

At that moment Phil burst into the room, Phil in her tunic, breeches and puttees. She looked hot and worried.

"Hello, my dears!" she cried. "How are you, Rector?" She laid a friendly hand on his shoulder as she passed to Mrs. Oakley's side. "Give me a cup of tea, please, Auntie. Plenty of milk, so that I can drink it at once. I'm in a tearing hurry."

She helped herself to half a toasted tea-cake and fell upon it hungrily.

"Sit down, Phil," said Mrs. Oakley, looking at her niece with disapproval. "You ought to have changed for tea."

"Sorry," replied Phil, quite unabashed. "I had no time to change. Besides, I must go back. It's that butter that won't come. Betsy, Caroline and I have been taking turns at the churn for more than three mortal hours. It's this cold east wind that's the bother. It was cold on the water yesterday, wasn't it, Rector?—but I didn't feel it, as I was sculling."

"I think I should appreciate boating more in the summer than at this time of the year," he replied without any enthusiasm.

"It is never really warm on the Broads," remarked Mrs. Oakley. "Whenever I've been on the water, it has always seemed very chilly."

"The trippers bathe in the Broads, don't they?" he asked.

"Yes, but in my opinion the sea water is much more pleasant. It is more buoyant than the fresh and is less suggestive of water-weeds and eels."

"Another cup of tea, please, Auntie, and then I must be off," said Phil, handing up her empty cup.

"Have you seen to the lambs?" asked Belton.

"Yes, I made time for them. Most of them are doing well. Even the last little misery that got wet in the terrific shower of sleet last night is going to pull through."

She was still standing. She put down her cup. Her uncle said: "A wet season plays old Harry with the lambs. I don't mind frosts and cold wind, but save me from sleet and rain."

"I must go. See you all later," cried Phil, picking up a second slice of cake to eat as she went back to the dairy.

"But, Phil!" remonstrated Mrs. Oakley. "Mr. Ringwood wants to talk to you."

"I can't possibly stop just now—unless he can tell me how to hurry up the butter when it won't 'come.' " She turned to Belton. "Uncle Dick, the shepherd says that these sick lambs will do better on tinned milk."

"He's right."

"Aunt Olive, is there any tinned milk in the storeroom?"

"No, dear. I'm afraid not. We have no use for it in our housekeeping."

"Then I shall have to run into Beltonville to get some as soon as I have finished in the dairy."

"Phil! Phil! just a moment," called Mrs. Oakley after her. Her aunt rose from her chair and followed her into the hall, closing the door behind her.

"My dear! you must have a talk with the Rector. He has come on purpose to see you."

"I can't sit down and have a chat as I am and I haven't time to change. He must wait."

"He wants his answer to the question he asked you yesterday."

"Oh! settle it as you like. And you can give him a kiss from me. He kisses quite nicely."

"He is very anxious that you——"

"I know! I know! He said all that last evening as we drove home. Bless his heart! He is rather a dear. When I am out of my articles with Uncle Dick——"

"Your articles! How absurd you are!"

"Anyhow, as I said before, settle it as you like and don't forget the kiss."

"Are you ever going to be serious?" asked Mrs. Oakley in despair.

"Yes, over the butter. I am serious to swearing point. Nearly four mortal hours 'coming.' One would think it was bewitched."

"But, Phil darling, about Mr. Ringwood. Do you like him?"

"He's an old dear!"

"Do you like anyone better?"

"No, he's the best of the bunch. If I have to get married some time or other, he'll do, and you'll like it, I know. I must really be off."

She scampered away to the dairy, where a heated Caroline and a much worried Betsy were still labouring in vain. They were longing to slip away to the kitchen for a cup of tea. Phil released them.

"Off you go! Scoot!" she cried, seizing the handle of the churn and throwing fresh energy into the task. "Cook is waiting for you with a fresh pot of tea and some of her hot toasted scones."

Mrs. Oakley returned to the drawing-room full of apologies. Her husband was doing his best to entertain the visitor.

"I am afraid I took Phil by surprise yesterday. She told you all about it, of course," said Ringwood.

Mrs. Oakley's thoughts went back to the previous evening. Just as they had seated themselves at the table, and without waiting for the maid to leave the room, Phil had electrified them all by saying:

"I say, Auntie! Here's a go! The Rector says he wants to marry me!"

The announcement had fairly taken their breath away and left them speechless. Phil, glancing round, had noted the effect of her words. The expression of amazement on their dear old faces was too much for her. She had gone off into a burst of laughter that was almost hysterical.

Mrs. Oakley was unable to repeat the story to the Rector.

"I must tell you that we were surprised, whatever Phil may have been," she said. Then, pulling herself together, she continued: "May I add that we were very pleased for dear Phil's sake. Her love-affairs have not run as smoothly as we could have wished. Perhaps now with entirely new prospects they may end more happily."

"I shall do my best to make her happy," said Ringwood warmly.

"Even if she brings along her favourite cow, Daisy," put in Belton with a smile, as he rose from his seat.

He and Oakley excused themselves on the plea of business and left Mrs. Oakley with the Rector.

"Will you stay to dinner?" asked Mrs. Oakley as soon as they were alone.

"What time do you dine?"

"At half-past six. It used to be six in my father's time and half-past five when my grandfather was alive. Phil would like to make it seven, but the old hour of half-past six suits my brother best unless he has to go to Norwich, as was the case yesterday."

"I am sorry I can't manage it. I have evensong at half-past six."

"Come in after dinner. You will find Phil properly clothed and with her mind free of butter anxieties."

"I dine myself at half-past seven. I am afraid I could not

get here before half-past eight, which would be rather late for you."

Mrs. Oakley admitted that it would be so.

"Phil goes to bed at nine. She is up between five and six. She is obliged to turn in early; so is my brother."

He rose to go. There was no point in staying on indefinitely.

"Better luck next time," he said, with a brave attempt to show a cheerfulness of spirit he was far from feeling. "I dare say that I shall find opportunities of seeing her. She is not making butter every afternoon——"

"No, it usually 'comes' under the hour and the work is cleared away long before lunch."

"Nor will she be scouring Beltonville for tins of milk for the lambs."

Mrs. Oakley was unwilling to let him go with nothing settled.

"Sit down again for a few minutes. It's only just five o'clock. There are two or three little points I should like to mention. Do you mind telling me if enough passed between you and Phil to give you grounds for considering yourself engaged to her?"

"I think I may safely say yes to that question."

"Did Phil give you a definite consent to your proposal, such as might constitute an engagement on her part?"

He hesitated as he searched back in his memory for the exact words that passed between them. Phil had listened in silence. She had allowed him to kiss her without repulsing him. On the contrary, he was under the impression that there had been a distinct return of the kiss. But on neither side had there been any display of great emotion. He had been restrained, and perhaps had not roused anything more than a half-hearted response.

"All I can honestly tell you, Mrs. Oakley, is that Phil didn't turn me down. I have been living on that fact ever since then."

"And you parted friends?"

"The best of friends. She also spoke confidently of seeing me some time to-day."

"You know her age?"

"She told me yesterday. She is younger than I thought."

"In many respects she is still a child as you will find out when you know her better."

Mrs. Oakley was nervously afraid lest he should be inclined

to resent Phil's off-hand manner and hoped that he would put it down to a childishness which time would cure.

"I talked it over with my husband and brother last night after Phil had gone to bed. They are her guardians as perhaps you know. She comes into her money when she is twenty-one. They decided that it would be as well if she waited till she was of age before she married. It would give her time to know her mind and if she really wished to marry a man like yourself with responsibilities."

She paused. She had a criticism to make which might seem to be disloyal to Phil. Yet she felt that she could not leave it unsaid.

"Much as I should like to see Phil your wife, I don't think that she is suited at present to fill that position with dignity. During the period of waiting till she is of age, she might lose her childishness and fit herself to be a rector's wife. At present she seems to be nothing but a happy care-free school-girl."

"It would mean two years of waiting, a long engagement from my point of view. I had contemplated making it six months at most," he replied. The prospect dismayed him.

"Some girls might be quite ready at her age but she is not."

Mrs. Oakley spoke with a conviction that was not to be gainsaid.

"I have the means to keep her as she is living now with you. I can afford a good housekeeper if she does not wish to be burdened with housekeeping and accounts."

Mrs. Oakley hastened to reassure him on the subject of expenditure.

"I have no fear that there will be any difficulty over finance. Did she tell you what her private means are independently of us?"

"We did not get down to any hard facts."

"Then it is just as well that I should make everything clear. Her father, my brother Godfrey, married against my father's wishes. The girl was everything that we could desire but her people were not. However Godfrey didn't marry the family. He married Marjorie. And when he found that she was not an acceptable daughter-in-law, he took her away to India where he got a commercial billet in some large stores. We all regretted it. The climate killed both Marjorie and Godfrey. They left two daughters, Joan and Phillis. Joan as you know

has married a man in the Army and is in the East. My father died and left a share of his property to Godfrey which Phil and her sister have inherited. When she comes of age she will have five hundred a year. At present her guardians allow her two hundred and fifty pounds a year which is more than enough for her needs as pocket-money. She pays nothing towards her keep."

"I had no notion—" he began, surprised at what Mrs. Oakley had just told him.

She continued: "Phil hasn't the appearance of an heiress playing the part of being a land-girl as she does. She would not have been so well off if we could have found her sister, the other twin."

"I have heard that she died in India."

"We presumed that she died. I hope she did. It is the best fate I could wish for the child, little Faith as she was called."

"It is very good of you to tell me all this," he said.

"It is only fair to you to know everything concerning the girl you propose to marry."

Then followed the assurances that he was marrying Phil for herself and had no thought of the financial side of the question.

"I quite understand," said Mrs. Oakley. "There is another fact which should not be lost sight of. Joan and Phil are the only heirs we old people have. The Old Hall estate is left to Phil and her heirs. My brother wishes it to be so. He will also leave her enough capital to keep it going in its present condition and there is no reason why she should not carry it on. She is certainly an apt pupil at learning how to do it. Joan will inherit the Beltonville freehold which is increasing in value every year. Perhaps now you will understand why my brother is so anxious that Phil should be thoroughly familiar with the working of the estate. He would like her to continue living here herself when he is gone."

"Which won't be for many years, I hope," he said. "Meanwhile she can transfer her energies to my work in the parish and leave the land to Mr. Belton's care. He ran it very successfully before Phil came on the scene as a land-girl."

Mrs. Oakley glanced at him with a growing wonder. She made no remark. At the moment the church bell rang out for evensong and he rose to go.

When she was once more alone she had time to think over what had been said. One fact was beginning to loom large.

Like most men, the Rector could only contemplate his marriage from one point of view and that was his own. Under the circumstances would Phil follow in the lines which he was mapping out for his future wife? Mrs. Oakley had her doubts.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

RINGWOOD was gratified to note the presence of Mrs. Oakley in the church at matins on the following morning. She waited for him after the service outside the vestry door.

"So glad to see that you were able to get to church," he said. "I suppose it was too much to hope that Phil could join you with all her many activities."

He caught his breath in a little sigh and she detected a note of disappointment in his voice which escaped involuntarily. Mrs. Oakley felt sorry for him but thought he would be wise to realize the truth and understand his position.

"I won't raise your hopes on that point. Phil will be loyal to my brother and carry on bravely until he can find someone who can replace her. He misses Clement who was killed in the War more and more each year that passes," she replied.

"Eleven o'clock in the morning is not asking too much of the church-goer," he observed. "I can understand, that with the dairy to look after, she might find eight o'clock inconvenient."

"After breakfast she is usually out somewhere on the estate with her uncle," explained Mrs. Oakley. "You mustn't give me credit for being entirely disinterested in my church-going to-day. I came to see you instead of writing you a note. I want to give you an open invitation to come up to the Hall whenever you like. Perhaps it would suit you best to drop in to tea in the afternoon. Come by way of the garden. You will always find the garden door unlocked and if fine standing open. We shall be so pleased to see you."

"It is very kind of you," he replied, touched by her anxiety to make him feel as though he were already one of the family. "Are you certain that Phil herself will like me to come in casually like that?"

"She won't mind what you do as long as you don't ring the front door bell. It worries her, if she is busy, to hear it. It means too often that a neighbour who has too much time on her hands has called to spend an hour with Phil who hasn't

it to spare. Phil has no patience with what she calls 'the idle rich' who just drop in for a gossip."

"I hope she won't take me for one," he said with a happy smile at the consciousness that he was going to be a privileged visitor. "I will risk it and come in by the garden way this afternoon."

"Do, we have tea at four o'clock."

She went on her way, returning to the house where she had plenty to occupy her. The Rector had two or three calls to make before going home. One was on old Jane. She met him at her cottage door.

"Good morning, Jane. I hope that you are feeling a little better now that the weather has improved," he said cheerfully.

"By the rights I ain't a mite better though you may say I look it," she replied, giving him a gloomy greeting. "But I hev' to get about whether I kin or whether I can't. Somebody hev' to bring in the coal and kindling and there ain't nobody to do it but me."

"Your married daughter should do it. She lives quite close to you."

"I won't have her amessing about in my house. She makes more litter than she's worth. Come in, sir, and sit down for a minute. They," the pronoun with Jane never specified any particular person when she was repeating village gossip. "They tell me that you let yourself be druv' by Miss Phil to the Broads all along of them narrow lokes that lead down to the 'mashes.' Didn't she pretty well scare you dead?"

"No, Jane. I have faith in her driving."

"Well, sir, that's your business, not mine, but don't you let her go and hull you into one of them there deeks by the side of the mashes."

"I'm not afraid," he replied.

"I'll own that she can drive and ride anything on legs or wheels. Lawk! you should have seen her last year astride the fore hoss, bringing in the last load of harvest."

"She had better have left Joe to do that."

Jane's old eyes dwelt knowingly on the Rector.

"When Miss Phil do take a husband," she said. "And that won't be yet awhile, it's her that will be the fore hoss I'll be thinking. He'll be in the shafts."

"After all isn't that the proper place for him? He'll do most of the pulling and will guide the wagon where it should go." He changed the subject firmly. "Jane, don't you

think that you could get as far as the church on Thursday morning for the eight o'clock service?"

"That would be very onconvenient. I hain't got a frock fit to go to church in. If there was a chapel within reach I might slip into a back seat all onbeknown just as I am with my owd garden bonnet on. But it don't fare right to go where the quality go in my owd frock. Then, too, I'd have to wash and do my hair same as Sunday."

He argued the point but his pleadings had no effect. In the middle of his harangue she pulled up her petticoats and asked him to give an opinion on the appearance of her sore leg.

"I think it looks better if anything," he said as he cast a timid glance at her naked flesh.

"My daughter, Polly's mother, was in yesterday, and she says that fare to be turning purple."

"It would mean a lessening of the inflammation."

"I think you're wrong, sir. That's the blood asetting round the place what didn't ought to settle."

He went on his way leaving her in the middle of her diagnosis and forebodings. He next called on an old pensioner of eighty whose Government pension was augmented by Belton. He also occupied his cottage rent free like Jane. He did a little work in his parden patch, prepared his food and managed most evenings to get down to the public-house.

Nothing pleased him more than to be allowed to talk to anyone who had time to listen. He invited the Rector to come in and sit down.

"For fifty years and more, sir, I worked on the estate. Mr. Belton, he don't forget me. He look in now and then when he's along this way with Miss Phil. Sometimes she bring me a bit of bacon or a few sausages if they happen to be killing a pig."

He rambled on without paying any attention to the remarks made by Ringwood.

"A rare good job that was, Miss Phil didn't marry that there furriner. Andrews, who used to go furrin as a sailor, was telling me that them brown and black people eat white people. He says there's yellow and red folks as well. You can't trust 'em with a gal or a bottle of rum. Lawk! a Lawk! supposing our Miss Phil had got ate up!"

Ringwood assured him that no such thing was likely to have happened. The old man preferred to pin his faith to his old chum, Andrews.

"You hain't been to furrin lands, have you, sir?" without waiting for a reply he continued dropping his voice to a confidential tone. "Our young Master Godfrey, Miss Phil's father, he took and married and went out to furrin parts. They do say that Miss Phil had a sister what was ate up out India way. Howsomedever, I'm right glad Miss Phil didn't marry the man. I see him once when he was awalking with her. He fared just like an Englishman except for his colour which was brown instid of white. He was dressed and shaved clean, same as our folk. But he might have been wholly covered with hair underneath his shirt for all you could tell. I couldn't help thinking that was so the minute I set eyes on him. What a surprise that would have been for Miss Phil if she had married him. She must have found it out after she was his wife."

Ringwood managed at last to turn the conversation on to the subject that had prompted his visit. He said that now the weather was getting warmer it might be possible for him to get as far as the church. He was aware that the walk to the public-house was not too much for the old man although he did not mention the fact. The church stood nearer to the cottage than the public-house.

He met with a firm refusal. He was assured that besides the difficulty of getting shaved and dressed in his best, the rheumatics were so painful that he could not possibly get there.

"You wouldn't believe it, sir, them there screws are so bad that I often have to hollar out. And if I should have to hollar out when I'm in church it would disturb you. I'm best at home where my duller (noise) don't hurt anyone."

With this the Rector had to be content. He consoled himself with remembering the old adage so true of the East Anglians, "you can't teach old dogs new tricks."

It was a consolation to call to mind the kind invitation Mrs. Oakley had given him. He turned up about four o'clock as he was bidden. He found his way to the drawing-room via the garden door and was greeted with a warm welcome from the assembled family.

Phil had joined her uncles and aunt. She was wearing a coat and skirt and looking her best. As he seated himself between Mrs. Oakley and herself Phil laid a hand lightly on his shoulder.

"So sorry, old dear, that I could not see anything of you yesterday," she said.

"All the fault of the butter I understand. Never mind. I forgave you. I had a nice long chat with your aunt. What happens to you all when it remains obstinate?" he said good-humouredly.

"It has never yet reached that point. We have always mastered it in the end but it has taken time."

When they had finished tea, Phil proposed a stroll in the garden, to which he agreed with alacrity. Suddenly she remembered that she wanted something from the parish-room. It was her fountain-pen which she had left on the desk the last time she was there.

"We will walk as far as that. You won't mind," she said, leading the way.

She possessed a duplicate key. They entered and he seized the opportunity to discuss a matter that was near to his heart.

"You haven't given me a reply yet," he said.

"Didn't Aunt Olive do it for me? I asked her to satisfy you and to give you a nice kiss into the bargain to welcome you as her new nephew."

"Second-hand kisses don't appeal to me. I'll take one at first hand now," he replied making the most of his opportunity.

The time slipped away all too quickly for Ringwood. But he was not satisfied. He could not help being aware of the fact that he had only her divided attention. Having found the object she had come to seek, her eyes were in every direction, taking stock of the room and searching for omissions on the part of the caretaker.

George Banham now held that post and Phil had nothing to complain of. He had a key of the room of which he was immensely proud and opened the door for the lads at half-past six. He would soon be arriving. The church bell tolled for evensong. It startled Ringwood. The time seemed to have flown.

"You're coming to the church with me for the service?" he said persuasively.

She glanced at her watch.

"I'm afraid I can't stay for it. I must hurry back for dinner. We dine at a horribly early hour. That's Uncle Dick's doing."

"One moment Phil," he said looking at her anxiously.

"May I consider it settled?"

"Yes, yes, I suppose so," she answered with a touch of impatience. Would the man never be satisfied? "Uncle Harry said something about waiting till I come of age before I marry. Oh, bother! Look at that untidy book-shelf! Those girls will not put the books back in the proper order on the shelves. I must speak to them about it."

She moved to the offending books and began to tidy the shelf. George's footstep sounded on the gravel path outside. She pushed the door open, calling to him to come in.

"We are just going," she said. "I came to fetch my fountain-pen."

"I found it on the desk, Miss. It's all safe."

She left the room and the Rector followed her. They separated at the gate.

"I shall look in for tea to-morrow since your aunt was kind enough to say I might do so," said Ringwood.

"Right-o, I don't think I have anything to do unless Uncle Dick has an errand for me. Good-bye, old dear, I must hurry or I shall be late for dinner."

CHAPTER FORTY

RINGWOOD gradually fell into the habit of going to the Old Hall for afternoon tea. It was an hour when he was at leisure. He enjoyed his chat with the three older members of the family. They were always present at the sociable informal gathering except on the days when business called Belton to Norwich.

Mrs. Oakley was at her place before the tea-tray. She never failed to have a smile of welcome for him and a ready sympathetic ear for all he had to say. She understood his many little difficulties with his stolid unimpressible parishioners far better than Phil who, try as she might, often failed to be even interested.

Phil turned up at tea on most days, but there were times when she was absent, off to Yarmouth or Norwich on some errand for her uncle. If it was only a short distance that she had to go and it could be done after tea, she carried off Ringwood with her. At least he could sit by her side and if she was not too much engrossed with her errand they could talk. But it was impossible to prolong the drive for the reason that she had to get him back in time for evensong.

She had learnt how much Ringwood disliked her land-girl's costume. Always considerate as far as lay in her power, of other people's feelings she shrank from putting in an appearance in the drawing-room in her working clothes. She managed to change before joining them or kept out of sight altogether.

One afternoon her uncle remarked:

"Phil, we hadn't time to get to the five-acre field at the top of the estate this morning. It is rather far for a walk. I wish you would run up in your car and see if the field has been properly bush-harrowed."

"Who did you put on to it?"

"George Banham, the new yard-boy. I thought it as well to let him try his hand at a light job like that before giving him more difficult work. I told him to leave the harrow by the gate and bring the old mare home. See that the gate is properly fastened so that no stock can get in."

"Isn't Joe the yard-boy?" asked Ringwood, remembering the name and also recalling the incident at the parish-room connected with George.

"He has turned eighteen and gets more than boy's wages," replied Belton. "He has been carting muck all day." He turned to Phil. "You might cast your eye over the heap as you come back. You will pass it. See if he has done the work properly."

"All right. Have you finished tea, Rector? If so we'll be off."

"And Phil, whilst you are about it," called her uncle after her. "Give an eye to the fences. There must be no gaps where the stock from the other fields can get through."

"I'll see that the hedges are all sound. Come along, Rector. We shall have ample time to do it if we start at once. I'll drop you at the church in time for evensong."

He followed her to the garage and she had the car out in no time. They sped along the lanes and by-roads without meeting a soul and arrived at the field that had been closed for hay. The bush-harrowing met with Phil's approval.

"Good boy! He has done his job well!" she said.

"Why do you say it is well done?" asked her companion who could not understand that there were two ways of bush-harrowing a grass field.

"He hasn't scamped the work. Shirking is one of the worst troubles we have to deal with in these days."

"How can he shirk such a simple matter as bush-harrowing?"

"By missing out any of the stetches. You can see the lines touching with no gaps left in between. He has also driven the harrow right up to the margin of the field."

"What reason would he have for scamping the work?"

"To give himself less trouble and save his legs. He is obliged to tramp every inch behind the harrow and it is tiring work as I know by experience because I have done it myself. It's heavy walking too. The ground is so uneven with mole-hills and tussocks of coarse grass. You want a good pair of boots to save your ankles."

They had begun to walk round the field. Ringwood, who wore shoes, was beginning to feel the unevenness she spoke of. He was carefully picking his way to her secret amusement.

"Joe was very troublesome about his work," she continued. "He couldn't even shut a gate properly behind him."

"What is the matter with him?"

"Laziness, he is as lazy as they make 'em. I don't suppose he can cart muck without dropping it about and leaving a cartload behind him. He has got to clean up the place where the muck has been heaped and not waste even a barrow load."

"What are you to do with a labourer upon whom you can't rely?"

"Sack him, and that's what uncle will do. He isn't worth his wages."

"And then what happens to him?"

"He will probably go herring fishing on a trawler. He will have to work then when the time comes for it."

The margin of the field was banked up. Out of the top of it grew a quickset hedge. This had been cut and trimmed in the past autumn. Masses of wild flowers were coming into blossom under the spring sun. They were out of reach of the marauding tripper. Beds of starry stitchwort backed by masses of cow-parsley with its feathery foliage covered the banks. The hawthorn was showing its clusters of buds in sunny patches where its neighbour the blackthorn had already scattered its petals. Primroses, and here and there a clump of bluebells, all in process of bud and blossom adorned the foot of the hedge.

The sight of the wealth of flowers, far in excess of anything to be seen by the road-side rejoiced the eye of Ringwood but was overlooked by the sharp scrutiny of the land-girl, coated and skirted though she was.

Phil was closely studying the fence which had been purposely left to grow taller than the hedges on the less exposed land. The fence formed a shelter from the east wind which swept the higher ground with a biting cold in the winter months.

She detected two weak places and made a note of them. The man who did most of the hedging and ditching on the estate would have to mend them. She pointed them out to Ringwood.

"Boys have been birds'-nesting and breaking down the hedge. I wish I could catch them. I would give them the fright of their lives, the little rascals! They want chucking out like George Banham from the parish-room. They are trespassing here."

"Do they belong to the parish?"

"Probably not. They come from a distance hoping that

if they have the bad luck to be caught they won't be recognized."

"Couldn't George do the catching and chucking out now that you have won him over to your side?"

"He might if he was on the spot. But he has his own work to do. A good yard-boy's work is never done."

"That seems to be the case with you. According to Mr. Belton's demands your work is never done."

Was there a touch of jealousy in his tone? She might have reminded him that the duties of a Rector's wife are just as numerous as her husband makes them, and may never be done.

"You may say with equal truth that Uncle Dick's work is never done. His eyes are everywhere from the time he gets up in the morning to the time he goes to bed. Even then he has one ear open—though he may be asleep—to the sounds that come from the stock-yard."

"But surely after the animals are shut up for the night no harm can come to them," he remarked.

"I'll tell you what happened two years ago. The farm-horses are put into a large straw-yard. A shed runs the length of it with a line of mangers where the food is left for the animals to eat at their leisure. At rare intervals William, when he opened the yard to allow the men to get out their teams, found a horse with a broken leg. It was a dead loss as it had to be shot. There was no doubt about what had happened. The wounded horse had been viciously kicked. One blow had been sufficient because they were shod with iron. There were seven horses in the yard. William looked them over carefully and was fairly puzzled. They all seemed so meek and mild and they had the best of characters. No vice whatever. There wasn't a pin to choose between them. Still one of them must be the culprit. They were closely watched for signs of ill-temper. Not a sign was detected. One night Uncle Dick, at about half-past three in the morning, sleeping with one ear open, heard a trampling and curious little squeals in the straw-yard. It was too early for the men to be about. The place was still asleep. He put on a great coat and his shoes and ran down to the yard. Six of the horses were huddled in a corner apparently terrified out of their lives. Running round them like a collie round a flock of sheep was a sleek little mare of the Suffolk punch breed. She was feinting at them with her heels till she had them all sweating and

trembling and some of them whinnying. Before he could get inside the yard the mischief was done. With a tremendous kick she let drive at a big shire horse. The poor thing squealed and then stood on three legs shaking as if it would drop, its fourth leg hanging useless and hopelessly broken."

"What did Mr. Belton do?"

"Called William up. He sleeps in a room over the brew-house. They took the mare out of the yard and got the lungeing rein and cart whip and gave my lady the best thrashing she ever had in her life. Uncle Dick sold her as soon as he could and told the purchaser never to let her be loose with other horses. She was a first-rate worker."

"Did your uncle find out the reason for her vice?"

"Of course they could only guess at it. She was small and probably got pushed aside at the manger by the bigger shire horses. She had to wait till they had satisfied themselves and she didn't like it. It was her way of taking her revenge. The animals we have to deal with on the farm are wonderfully like human beings. But I love them all the same. And I seem to understand them as I understand the Georges and the Joes. They all want watching, men and beasts."

"The men ought to be trusted to finish their tasks without so much supervision," he protested.

"One can't slack off for a minute if things are to be done well. If the labourers were allowed to shirk we should suffer."

"How could it affect you?"

"If a field isn't ploughed from end to end right up to the margin we lose ground. If a stretch is missed in the drilling—that's the space occupied by each group of furrows—it's a loss to the farmer. Once it is missed it can't be sown afterwards. It is lost for the year and the corn that might have been grown on it. That's why the farmer doesn't like right-of-way foot-paths across his fields. People will not keep to the path. They straggle all over the ground adjoining and trample the young corn down when it is coming up so that it can't grow."

He listened to her words of farming wisdom with a certain amount of interest. One thing was apparent; the cultivation of the land lay very near her heart. But he was beginning to regard it as an obsession, a very serious rival to his own interests and work. It raised a barrier between him and herself. It was an obstacle to her entrance into his world. It even interfered with their personal relations.

There were times when he wanted to take her in his arms and forget the parish and the farm, when he wished that she was conscious only of his presence, his personality, his sole existence.

But somehow the moment never came. He could never persuade himself that she was his and his alone to the exclusion of all other beings. Her mind was never free from the thoughts of the work she had taken up so enthusiastically under Belton's masterly teaching.

Her head might be resting on his shoulder, his lips on her scented hair, he knew that he was not holding the foremost place in her thoughts. Lambs, piglets, calves, foals, fluffy chickens and ducklings just out of the incubator were never altogether out of her mind. And he craved for her whole attention. He could not tolerate the thought of sharing her with any creature however harmless and innocent it might be.

He determined to make another effort to induce her to attend his services. Surely in the quiet building she would be able to think of him and join with him in his worship. When she became his wife she would be obliged, in common decency, to accompany him when he went to his beloved church.

Sometimes he wondered how he was going to detach her from her uncle and from her land-girl's work. Would it ever be possible to induce her to transfer an undivided attention to the parish and, he might have added, to himself?

With his rather old-fashioned opinions inherited from the good woman who was his mother, he firmly believed that a wife's whole mind should be concentrated on her husband and his welfare, his pursuits, his ambitions and above all his spiritual aim in life. There should be nothing to distract her attention unless it were her children. Even they should come second in the scheme of her existence and their care be made subordinate to the devotion and duty offered to her husband.

It did not strike him that the line he had mapped out for his wife to take might not prove as attractive as the course she was following under Belton's guidance. Belton was more or less of a successful farmer in times that were admitted to be hard for the agriculturist. Many men in the county were just scraping along as they called it. They made only a difficult living out of their acres. Belton was doing better

although he was not piling up a fortune. He had enough to live upon as his fathers had lived before him and had something over which went into the new seaside town of Beltonville. Phil was learning how to work the land that she would one day inherit.

She had spoken a deeper truth than Ringwood had realized when she said that Belton would be his only rival.

It was about a fortnight later. The cuckoo was in full voice. Hidden in the covert the nightingale was singing its shy song over the dense bed of rank stinging nettles which covered its nest. The nest was of brown oak-leaves tucked away on the lowly stump of an old tree. It was completely hidden in its armoured shelter into which no bare-legged marauding boy dared venture. The cock bird, perched on a bush near by proclaimed his satisfaction in soft notes at night and at three in the afternoon when the shrill thrush and whistling blackbird were silent.

If Phil was not engaged, Ringwood intended to beg for a drive down to the marshland. He wanted to see the gleaming sheet of golden marsh marigolds spreading over the lush grass, the yellow flag and the purple loosestrife of the ditches. He had never heard the musical crooning in the sky of the snipe as it circled over the spot where sat its nesting mate. The plover was more familiar but he longed to hear it again.

He arrived punctually in time for tea. The uncles and aunt were just sitting down. Phil had not come into the drawing-room yet. At the end of ten minutes he inquired if anything was detaining her.

"Busy about some job at the back," said Belton.

"Can I find her?" asked the Rector.

"Probably if you go to the dairy."

"She is sure to come in presently," said Mrs. Oakley with a shadow of anxiety in her eyes. "It will be better to wait. She is most likely changing her dress. She knows that you don't like to see her in her land-girl's rig as she calls it." She turned to her brother. "Was she by the dairy when you saw her?"

"Yes," he replied, filling his mouth with toasted tea-cake which made talking difficult.

"What was she doing?" Mrs. Oakley asked.

Belton did not reply. Oakley also kept a discreet silence.

"Perhaps the butter is giving trouble again," suggested Ringwood.

"It isn't the day for churning," replied Mrs. Oakley. "The churning is done every other day. I don't know what it can be."

Phil had her reasons for not telling her aunt about the particular business that was engrossing her attention at the moment.

"I'll go and find her," said Ringwood. "No, thanks, Mrs. Oakley. I won't have any more tea. I want to see her about the entertainment we are getting up at the parish-room next Saturday."

He left the room. The house was familiar to him and he had no difficulty in making his way to the dairy.

Adjoining the dairy was a cool and airy room with a large copper in it. Formerly it had been the brew-house where the excellent home-brewed beer, for which the Old Hall once had a reputation, was made. Since the introduction of the stringent rules necessitating a licence for the manufacture of malt liquor the room had been used for other purposes. There was a good bedroom overhead. This from time immemorial had been assigned to the use of the yard-man. William, an old bachelor like his master, was the present occupant.

As Ringwood stood at the open door he was confronted with a scene which he never forgot.

Phil, armed with a butcher's knife and aided by the experienced William, had just finished cutting out the leg of a dead pig. The carcass was suspended from one of the hooks that studded the big beam of the ceiling.

The pig had been killed the previous day. It had been scalded with boiling water and cleft with a butcher's cleaver down the spine. And now, under William's guidance, Phil was receiving a lesson in cutting out the joints. Some were to be put into pickle, some into plain brine and some were to be roasted or boiled as "green" or fresh pork.

Phil had trimmed the leg neatly. The pieces sliced off had been thrown into a basin of water. They were destined to become the home-made brawn so much appreciated as a sustaining breakfast dish in the farmhouse.

She caught sight of Ringwood as he literally gaped at her in amazement. She hurried towards him. The sleeves of her shirt were rolled up to her elbows and she still gripped the ham she had been busy with. Her hands were greasy

with the white fat of the animal. She was spotted with blood which showed up vividly on the large white linen apron which she wore. A long red smear ran down her cheek from temple to chin. She wore her land-girl's dress which had not escaped the tell-tale stains, and would need the attention of the laundress before she put it on again.

"Sorry, old dear!" she cried anathematizing her aunt for allowing Ringwood to escape from the drawing-room. "I can't come in to tea. Cook has sent me out a cup from the kitchen tea. It will take another two hours to finish cutting up the pig. I'll send you a couple of pounds of real home-made pork sausages to-morrow."

William, seeing the visitor, took the ham from Phil's hands.

"Here, Miss, give me that there joint. George will hang it up till it can be put into pickle."

"I think I have finished it off rather nicely," said Phil with a note of self-satisfaction.

"That you have, Miss," replied the approving William.

Ringwood continued to gaze at Phil with a mixture of anger and disgust in his eye.

"You're in an awful mess, Phil," he said at last as if he was compelled to speak but could not find words to express his feelings.

"I know I am but you don't want to kiss me here, do you, with William and George looking on?"

"I think I should be sick if I did!"

He said it in such a way as to rouse a sudden flame of anger in Phil. His openly expressed disgust was too much for her good nature and she turned upon him swiftly.

"It will be no loss let me tell you if you never kiss me again," she cried.

"Why, oh! why can't you leave all this sort of thing to William and George?" he asked almost fretfully.

"Because it pleases me to do it."

"What about me? Do you think I like to see you doing this sort of thing? Are my feelings never to be considered? Let me tell you that it is trying enough to have you aping the farmer——"

"If you can't put up with me as I am made——"

"Don't talk nonsense please," he snapped.

She turned away abruptly and retreated into the brew-house where the pig hung.

"Come along, William. Let's get on with our job," she said.

Ringwood departed without another word. He felt that he had been betrayed into something very nearly approaching a serious loss of temper.

The next day they made up their differences but the incident left its scar.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

MATTERS ran more smoothly after the pig incident. The little difference between the lovers over the propriety on the part of Phil of playing at the butcher cleared the air. Phil was inclined to blame her aunt rather than the Rector for what had happened. Mrs. Oakley had permitted him to go in search of her and to penetrate to the back of beyond, the scene of all sorts of domestic operations not meant for the public eye. Mrs. Oakley could so easily have rung the bell for the parlour-maid and sent a message to Phil.

"You should have told me that you were going to cut up the pig," said Aunt Olive in justification of her conduct.

"And if I had done so what would you have said?"

Mrs. Oakley did not reply. Her niece answered for her.

"That cutting up the pig was a job for William, and not for me. I like to do things first when my heart is set on them and ask leave afterwards," said Phil mutinously.

"Possibly," replied Mrs. Oakley with her habitual placidity.

Phil's satisfaction in having had her way regardless of consequences, served to disperse the little cloud of annoyance that had gathered on her brow. She began to enumerate the results of her efforts. "How much do you think we got out of that pig?" she asked.

Mrs. Oakley did not attempt to estimate the gain. It was of course necessary to slaughter a pig two or three times a year, but she always ignored the horrible fact and kept away from sight and sound of it, taking herself off to Norwich or Yarmouth on the plea of urgent shopping. Phil continued with intense satisfaction

"There were ten pounds of good pork sausages, no beef mixed with them. Six pounds of brawn, two hams, two gammons which cook has put into pickle and will send to the cooper's to be smoked, two lovely loins for roasting two collars, to say nothing of the sides of bacon and the bath chaps. Nothing was wasted. The pig has cut up very well and William is very well satisfied."

"Next time you are doing the butcher let me know," said Mrs. Oakley drily. "And I'll keep the Rector off the grass."

"Poor Rector!" said Phil with a chuckle. All ill-humour was dispersed, and she was the happy land-girl again. "It is absolutely certain that he has had no experience of farm life. Auntie, darling, you should have seen the dear man's face when he caught sight of me! I have never known him to be so angry."

"Don't try him too much, Phil. I am going to church on Thursday to the eight o'clock service if I can get up in time."

"To console him for my short-comings!" asked Phil with a laugh.

"Couldn't you manage now and then——"

Phil knew what was coming. She interrupted hastily and vehemently.

"No, I couldn't. It lies between him and Betsy, and Betsy wins hands down."

"Then you must be very kind in spending all the time you can spare with him to help him to recover from the shock you gave him yesterday."

"I suppose he will be here to tea to-day," said Phil.

"If he isn't too much offended."

"Then I'll give him a treat and drive him down to the marshes after tea. I know he wants to go. He can gloat over the marsh marigolds and plovers while I count the cattle. Uncle Dick wants me to have a look at the stock we turned out for the summer. I do hope he won't talk about the Bishop and the diocese and the church all the time. If he does I shall blow my horn. He can't talk through that."

"He told me that the Bishop asked him to be Rural Dean."

"He won't have to wear apron and gaiters for that, will he?" asked Phil a little startled.

"I think not. A Rural Dean has no distinctive dress. I am sure that he is pleased. These matters lie very near his heart. And whatever he takes in hand, he does thoroughly. He is like you in that respect. I am afraid you don't fully appreciate his worth."

"Bless him!" cried Phil. "He's a good man. I wonder if he was ever naughty like other boys. But, oh, dear! Good people are apt to be dull!"

Ringwood enjoyed his drive. More especially did he appreciate the fact that he had sole possession of his harum-scarum love, for the time being. She was clothed as he liked to see her, and he believed that he had her undivided

attention. It did not enter his mind that he was sharing it with the cattle.

"Rector, I hear that you have persuaded old Jane to promise to come to church in spite of her bad leg," Phil remarked as they ran along the lanes where the hedges were green and the wild rose showing buds.

"Your aunt has set her a good example which she is going to follow."

Phil laughed in mild derision.

"Jane's behaviour has nothing to do with Aunt Olive's example. Confess, Rector, that it is a case of flagrant bribery. You have given Jane a new frock."

He did not deny it.

"It only cost a few shillings," he urged in his defence.

"In a short time she will have a new bonnet out of you. Then a pair of boots. A shawl will come next and goodness knows where the cadging will end. The last thing will probably be a bath-chair to take her to church."

"My gift has made her very happy. She says she hasn't had a new frock since her husband died. But I really believe that Mrs. Oakley's good example has had more to do with it than the dress."

"I know her little ways," cried Phil unconvinced. "She will sit under Aunt Olive's compassionate gaze and pose for pity. She will cadge as much out of her as she will get out of you."

He did not argue the point. Something else was occupying his mind.

"I wish you could manage to come to matins sometimes, Phil darling."

"I am fairly regular on Sundays at the eleven o'clock service. And I do my best to get to the eight o'clock once a month. But it is always a rush to do it because I must dress."

He did not deny it. A land-girl's costume was out of place in a sacred building, although, why it should have been considered so he could not have said.

"Why not come in on week-days?"

"Impossible!" she replied with a touch of impatience.

"Just once a week," he pleaded.

"Who is to look after the separator?"

"The separator?"

"The machine that separates the cream from the milk."

"Can't Caroline do that?"

"She has to carry the milk to the separator and keep up the supply."

"What about Betsy?"

"She is busy releasing the cows from the milking apparatus."

"It seems that you want another hand in the dairy."

"We could do with another pair of eyes. And if I came to church what good could I do sitting there idle while the dairy work was shrieking for me?"

They both argued till they grew heated. Neither could convince the other of the importance of the claim of their different duties. Which was the greater, to pray or to work? It has been said *Laborare est orare*, to work is to pray. But this, Ringwood was not ready to admit. Although he took it in good part, maintaining a smile throughout their discussion, her obstinacy tried his patience sorely.

"Perhaps things may be easier for you after we're married," he said at last.

"I shan't be of age for ever so long and I've promised the two uncles that I will wait till then."

Was there an unconscious ring of satisfaction in her voice as she reminded him of the conditions? Fortunately it passed unnoticed.

"I was hoping that your guardians would consent to an earlier date," he said.

"Uncle Harry might. He's easy going enough. But I feel certain that Uncle Dick will hold me to the bargain. He hasn't found anyone to succeed me yet. And I really don't know where he is to look for a young man who is attracted to land cultivation in these days. There's no money in it, although if you plod along with your eyes about you, a comfortable living may be made. The young men now-a-days all want work where they can keep themselves clean and tidy and have time for football and games of sorts."

"If Mr. Belton made it worth his while, a young fellow just leaving the University——"

Phil interrupted him with a laugh of derision.

"I think I see an Oxford man who has just taken his degree, helping the vet ringle the pigs, nursing sick lambs and giving huge feeding bottles to new-born calves! Can you picture it! You couldn't do it yourself to save your life. You know you couldn't!"

He did not contradict her. It was quite true. He could not have put his hand to the work that she found so engrossing. To such an extent did he hate it that he was not able to tolerate the sight of her when she was immersed in it. He was essentially a townsman, reared in sound of traffic and church bells. Never before had he been brought into contact with a country parish, and the intimate working of farming and stock-raising, of dairy work and the breeding of pigs.

Fortunately Phil with her new interests had not adopted the attitude she had taken up with her Indian lover. There opposition had played a large part in urging a youthful impatient character into self-willed obstinacy.

Sometimes Ringwood's common sense hinted that he had been rash in asking Phil to be his wife. If he had not been so self-centred and blind to everything but his own personal feeling, he might have seen that their marriage could not be anything but a failure. Phil's guardians had been wiser than they knew in insisting on deferring the wedding until she was twenty-one.

Mrs. Oakley was gradually awakening to the full consciousness that her niece was not cut out to be a parson's wife. Phil's good-natured readiness to help in all parish matters had deceived Aunt Olive into believing that she would be invaluable as an assistant to the man who was doing his best to awaken a little spiritual life in the sleepy, East Anglian village of which he had charge.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

THE harvest approached and created the yearly undercurrent of excitement and bustle in the dormant little world by the sea. Every man and boy on the farm was anxious to have a part in it and benefit by the extra money that was attached to the work.

Phil was busier than ever. While her duties multiplied under Belton's demands, it seemed that Ringwood made more and more requests for her assistance. It was all for the good of the parish he pleaded when he asked her to help him in working the magic-lantern to illustrate his lecture on mission work in India and China. She had two masters, both of them of an exacting nature in their separate ways. Cheerfully and good-naturedly she put her hand to anything that her uncle asked and every request that the Rector made.

St. Swithun's day approached. He was patron saint of the church and had to be duly honoured. The anniversary occurred on a Sunday in the middle of July a few days before the cutting of the corn began in Northern East Anglia.

Phil undertook to decorate the church aided by a picked band of helpers from the village. It was to be done on Saturday, a day when they were at liberty to join her. She had an ample supply of flowers from the Old Hall gardens. The festival was held on the Sunday. It was well advertised in Beltonville. A large addition to the congregation composed of visitors was expected.

Ringwood was in his element and supremely happy, although he was not doing much actual work himself. His thoughts were devoted to the best means in his power of making the special services attractive to the people. He had every confidence in Phil as an organiser of the adornment of the building. He felt that he might safely leave it in her hands without any interference on his part. He was content to hover about the church looking on and approving.

The girls she had gathered about her were her willing slaves. She seemed to be here, there and everywhere, guiding with a sure hand the somewhat crude efforts of the inexperienced. She was never uncertain as to what was to be done, or the

manner in which a scheme should be carried out. An appeal to her judgment brought instant decision with definite orders as to how it should be done. Her helpers found a pleasure in working under a leader who was so down-right and decided.

Ringwood was grateful and happy and not a little proud of her. She made the altar her special business. As she arranged vase after vase and placed them in position he could not take his eyes from the clever fingers that seemed to be working nothing less than magic.

When the decorations were finished and the assistants despatched to the parish room to make themselves the jorum of tea which they felt that they had earned, Phil and the Rector stood for a few minutes contemplating the result. The scent of roses and lilies filled the air and his eye revelled in the mass of ordered colour.

"I have never seen the church look so well," he said softly remembering where he was. "All your doing, darling. My best thanks for the trouble you have taken."

"It's sweet of you to say so, old dear," she replied with less enthusiasm than he showed.

This was not her first attempt at church decoration by a long way. Christmas, Easter, and the Harvest Thanksgiving services all in their turn made the same demand. The verdict of the appreciative congregation never varied.

"The church had never looked so pretty," was in everybody's mouth.

There was to be a celebration of the Holy Communion at eight o'clock in the morning and matins at eleven.

Mrs. Oakley at the instigation of the Rector had presented the church with a banner. It was to be carried in procession for the first time by the choir as the men and boys marched up the aisle.

Ringwood had taken much trouble in training his boys to march at a dignified pace in the processional hymn. In their nervousness they had a tendency to scamper and shuffle instead of keeping step. After every choir practice he had patiently drilled them into order impressing on them that their eyes must not be allowed to wander. Their tendency was to search for their relations with a conscious grin.

"You will be present at the eight o'clock service, Phil," he said laying a hand on her arm with a gentle touch.

"Of course I shall attend," she replied decisively. "Aunt Olive will be there and I think the two uncles as well."

"What about matins at eleven?"

"We shall all come, and the maids as well. Caroline will be left in charge to keep the kitchen fire going and see to the cooking of the potatoes for lunch. They are a new kind of potato and Uncle Dick is very anxious that they should be properly cooked."

Ringwood had his eyes on the altar with its masses of lilies. He made no reply. Phil continued.

"We are digging them up every day now, and they are turning out very well. No sign of disease I am glad to say."

"What are, darling?" he asked, his thoughts far from the produce of the kitchen garden.

"The potatoes. They are a new kind which we got from Sutton."

He turned and walked down the aisle, leaving her to follow. If she must talk of vegetables it was best done outside the church. She followed, unaware that she was once more getting on his nerves. She glanced at her watch.

"Good-bye old thing, I must run home to lunch. I hope that you will have a fine day to-morrow for—for your show."

"Show!" again he felt an inward jar to his nervous system. He was not accustomed to hear festival services spoken of as "shows."

Sunday in spite of it being St. Swithun's was a glorious day. The sun bore down with a July heat which was tempered by the breeze that came in from the sea.

Ringwood arrived at the church early. The sexton was before him however. He had opened the doors wide. The scent of the flowers after having been shut up all night was oppressive. The congregation had already begun to arrive and some of the old people of the village were gossiping in the churchyard.

The vestry was at the West end of the church. It was a spacious annexe with a portion divided off by a curtain for the special use of the clergy. The choir had plenty of room to robe and form up in processional order before entering the church.

The Rector could not deny himself the pleasure of a glance round the body of the building. The flowers were as fresh as when they were arranged. Nothing had dropped out of place and no petals had fallen.

The congregation was increasing although it was only eight o'clock and there were several strangers. What would it be

three hours later? A noble gathering for the old church, doubtless.

Mrs. Oakley accompanied by her brother and her husband entered, and Ringwood dropped the curtain through which he had been prospecting. It was a plain celebration at this hour with no choir or music. He had the vestry to himself except for the sexton.

Ringwood put on his surplice. Once more he drew aside the curtain to cast a glance round the church. He was looking for Phil. If she happened to be a little late, she did not disturb her aunt by pushing past her into the hall pew. She usually slipped into one of the seats lower down.

She was not there. Possibly she was late in getting away from Betsy. The bell was still tolling. There was time yet. But why was she not there? he wondered. She had promised faithfully that she would come. He was punctual to the minute in beginning the services and she knew it.

He waited, his eyes on the vestry clock. Three minutes grace he gave her. He could wait no longer. The sexton caught his eye. He made a sign that he was ready. The man drew the heavy curtain that hung before the entrance into the church. Ringwood moved towards the doorway and passed into the aisle. He tried to put her out of his thoughts, to forget if possible, her very existence.

As he walked up the aisle towards the chancel he kept his eyes rigidly fixed on the altar before him. All through the service he never once looked down the church to ascertain if she had come in. He felt that she was absent, that if she had intended to be present she would have arrived with her aunt or immediately afterwards. He could not account for her absence, and he was troubled.

He did his best to concentrate his mind on the sacred office which he was administering. In spite of his efforts a sense of loneliness crept over him. He felt slighted and hurt by her neglect. She had promised faithfully that she would be present at both services.

What could be the matter? what was the reason? She could not have been suddenly taken ill, or Mrs. Oakley would have stayed away also. He must be patient. The explanation would be forthcoming after the service.

Ringwood was single-handed. He had no assistant. As a rule the work was no more than one man could easily accomplish. To-day there was a larger congregation than usual.

It was gratifying. But it made the service longer in consequence. It was some time after nine o'clock before he was able to drop into his chair at his solitary breakfast-table. And then he found that he had not much appetite for the eggs and bacon which Mrs. Pearce put before him.

At half-past ten he was back in the vestry where already the members of the choir were beginning to assemble. An undercurrent of excitement ran through the boys, due to the innovation of the banner.

Mrs. Oakley and her husband came in and took their seats. The church was filling fast and the two sidesmen, tradesmen from Beltonville, were busy finding seats for the visitors. The church was not large, and when it was built, three centuries ago there was no seaside town to be considered.

Ringwood peered through the curtain. The large congregation rejoiced his heart. He had never seen the building so full. But there was no sign of Phil. Belton was also absent. Was it possible that he had detained his niece to look after some small matter which would very well have kept till Monday?

The choir robed in cassocks and surplices and with hymn-books in their hands had formed processional order two by two, the smallest boys in front, and the men behind, Ringwood standing last. Thus ready to emerge, they awaited the short preliminary prayer which should conclude with a chanted "Amen." This was the signal for the organist to stop the soft voluntary and wait for the processional hymn to be given out.

The sexton instead of placing his hand on the curtain in readiness to draw it back approached Ringwood and spoke to him in a whisper.

The Rector bent forward to catch his words which it was evident the man did not wish should reach the ears of the choir. From the expression of the sexton's face Ringwood divined that it was something of importance that he had to communicate.

"Yes? What is it?" he asked, noting the hesitation.

"Someone wants to see you outside. It is very urgent."

"I can't see anyone now," replied Ringwood with a frown that showed his displeasure.

"I was to say that it was very important, very urgent indeed."

Ringwood made a quick, impatient movement and passed

through the outer door leading into the churchyard. The sexton wisely closed the door behind him shutting out all sound of voices.

The Rector's astonished gaze fell on the figure of Phil, Phil in her land-girl's dress, hot, and tired and very dirty. She advanced towards him.

"Rector, I'm so sorry. I can't possibly come to church. I have been up since half-past five this morning. I thought at one time we should lose her. But I am glad to say she has pulled through."

"Who, old Jane?"

"No, no. Jane is all right. She is in church wearing her new bonnet."

"Then who are you talking about?"

"Daisy, my little cow. She has got the finest calf you ever saw, exactly like Old Hemp, true-bred red-polled. We have been up with her since half-past five and I'm dead beat. I thought you would wonder why I wasn't in church. I haven't had time—" but he was gone.

With an abruptness that startled her he opened the door and passed into the vestry. He closed it behind him with the nearest approach to a bang that was decent in a sacred building.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

FOR some seconds Phil remained motionless. What had she done? What enormity had she committed? She was aghast at the frown of annoyance that had so suddenly gathered on his brow, as he listened to the explanation she offered for her non-attendance at church.

"He ought to have felt sorry for me," she thought, as the moisture sprang into her eyes. Resolutely she kept down the tears of vexation. "Instead of pitying me, he looked as if he could have killed me on the spot. I wonder if he will ever realize that there are other things that matter in life besides his rotten old——"

She checked the words that rose in anger to her lips. They were not complimentary nor quite just to the man nor loyal to his beloved church.

Slowly she plodded home to the Old Hall with a weary body and sick heart. On her way she glanced in on the mother and her new-born calf. All was well. The vet who had been hastily summoned had left. William was still about, tidying up. With some pride he told her that the vet had declared that Miss Phil's prompt aid had saved the little life that was so valuable. It was a bull calf that in course of time would be worth a hundred pounds, like its sire.

Phil took her bath and changed into her Sunday frock, as she called it. Her breakfast had been sketchy and interrupted. She was ready for lunch when the bell rang.

Aunt Olive came in and took her seat, followed by her husband and brother. She was as placid as ever.

"A very full church. Mr. Ringwood must have been much gratified," she remarked.

"Were the flowers still fresh?" asked Phil.

"They were lovely and so beautifully arranged, thanks to your clever fingers."

"Congratulations," said Uncle Harry, who was aware that she was responsible for the display.

"You couldn't manage to get to either of the services, I hear," said Belton. "It couldn't be helped. I am glad you

stayed at home. I've seen William. He says that you saved the calf's life by keeping the mother quiet. Congratulations."

Phil gave him a grateful smile. At any rate he appreciated her self-sacrifice, if no one else did.

"How did the service go?" she asked presently.

"Splendidly," replied Mrs. Oakley. "The boys looked so proud of their banner. The Rector ought to be very pleased."

"Somehow he didn't look particularly happy," observed her husband. "He might have been tired. It took him some seconds to clear his voice and get going on the intoning."

"A bit of a cold, perhaps," said Mrs. Oakley. "I must send him some throat lozenges. He will never think of buying them himself."

She was in happy ignorance of the clouds that hung over the poor man.

It was not the custom of the Rector to put in an appearance at tea on Sundays. It surprised no one, therefore, that he was absent.

Phil attended evensong. She was conscious of great fatigue as she slipped into the Belton pew. She had it to herself. It was a welcome rest to body and mind to find herself in church with no call upon her for at least another hour and half. Her presence did not escape the Rector's notice. He was careful to avoid catching her eye or of showing any consciousness of her existence.

He was still extremely angry. It was outrageous that she should present herself before him at such a moment and in such a state, reeking of the cow-house and muddy from head to foot. It was an insult in itself. It was irregular in any circumstances to call him away just as he was about to say a prayer before proceeding with the choir up the church.

It had only added to her offence to explain at such a moment the reason for her non-attendance. Would she never learn that there was a time and place for allusion to the incidents connected with the farm, and that the church was not the right place for it? The domestic events of the farm belonged to the old Hall and its weekday doings of daily life, like the baking of bread and the cooking of joints and puddings.

Reason with her he might, his past experience told him that it would be waste of breath and useless. She would only

laugh and call him a fussy old dear. She would remind him that she did not fail to do her bit, as she called it, whenever the church wanted decorating or anything was required for the parish room.

Monday came. He had slept badly. His resentment softened. It was difficult to be angry with Phil, whatever her shortcomings might be. Her personal charm was too attractive. But while his annoyance was dying down other misgivings were taking its place.

The question arose again and again, each time with increasing insistence. Was he wise in pursuing this desire of his heart?

Fifty times he asked himself the question: Would she be the kind of wife that he ought to have at his side to help him in his spiritual work among his people?

He was deeply in love with her. At the same time he was aware that her affection for him was immature. He had comforted himself with the thought that she was young, too young to feel at present the deeper emotions that would come when she was a wife.

He told himself with a sinking heart that it would be wise to retire while it was possible.

Yet he shrank from taking any drastic action. He determined to see what time would do. If she held out the olive branch he knew that he would accept it and defy the future.

He hoped that she would send some sort of apology. She was the offender, and it was for her to make the first move. All day he was looking for a messenger who would bring one of Phil's short, rapidly written notes, ungrammatical, not very coherent and never quite sure of its spelling. It did not come.

Four o'clock struck. On ordinary occasions he would have been arriving at the old Hall. He debated within himself whether he should go. Perhaps, if he stayed away, Phil might comprehend the enormity of her offence in summoning him out of the vestry at the supreme moment when he was about to commence one of his most important services.

He could not conceive of anything which would warrant such an action.

And what was her excuse? Merely to inform him of one of the commonest incidents in the domestic life of the estate,

a matter which should not have taken up her attention to the exclusion of her religious duties.

He could imagine the scene when they met. In her light, inconsequent manner she would laugh and tell him that he was a darling old boob to worry himself over a trifle of the kind. Again they would go over the old question of whether church-going or the urgent duties of the farm were of the greater importance.

Again they would disagree, neither yielding in the least degree to the other, he arguing with a vital seriousness, she with a good-humoured smile on her lips showing that they were as far apart as ever.

Ringwood would leave her with the conviction that agreement was impossible. It was useless to hope that he could bring her round to his way of thinking.

Here was his opportunity to break away from a condition of things that could only end in disaster for them both. He must seize it, however bitter the result might be to his own feelings.

All through the week he kept away from temptation, afraid if he came in contact with her that he would forgive the offender and make up the quarrel.

On Sunday he took the services as usual. Phil stayed away from the church, making some excuse to her aunt.

Mrs. Oakley could not fail to observe that all was not right with the couple. She missed Ringwood at tea. But she dared not inquire of Phil why he had not appeared. She concluded that they had quarrelled. If they were given time and not interfered with possibly the clouds would blow over.

Phil on her part was not happy over the affair. She was aware that she had given him offence by calling him away at a crucial moment. But the farming instinct was so deeply implanted in her blood that she could not believe anyone could be indifferent to the importance of the momentous event, the addition of a fine bull-calf to a pedigree herd of cattle.

She had been hurt by his abrupt retreat, by the closing of the vestry door on that hot summer's day when every door should have been left open or ajar. He had shut it with a gesture of anger that could not be mistaken. And now he was assuming a silence that was actually discourteous.

Well, two could play at that game, was her thought. If he

chose to be disagreeable he might sulk by himself. All the same, as she followed her uncle in his rounds about the estate, she kept her eyes open on the chance of catching sight of Ringwood and getting in touch again.

Phil was not of a vindictive nature. If she met him she would at least make a friendly sign to him and give him an opening to extend the hand of reconciliation. But he was nowhere to be seen. He appeared to have vanished off the scenes altogether.

When ten days had elapsed without a word or sign, Phil could bear it no longer. She determined to put an end to this silence which was getting on her nerves. Either the engagement should be broken off or the breach should be healed. She would leave it to him to decide which.

On the Wednesday after a rather silent tea—the uncles and aunt asked no questions—Phil, saying nothing to anyone, took her car out of the garage and drove off to the rectory.

The house, an old building, faced the road. It stood back from the highway and was protected from it by a row of posts linked together by chains.

At the back was a large garden, with an orchard and paddock beyond. Opening on the meadow stood the spacious old tithe barn with the other outbuildings where in former times a couple of cows were kept, a pig or two and some fowls. Mr. Ringwood would have none of them.

Phil swung round the curve between the open posts that formed the carriage drive and pulled up at the front door. She gave three short blasts on her horn, the signal agreed upon between her and the Rector.

Contrary to custom, the front door stood open. It was almost immediately filled by the figure of a strange parson whom she had never seen before.

"Is Mr. Ringwood at home?" she asked.

"Mr. Ringwood left last Monday, and I arrived yesterday. With the Bishop's permission he and I have exchanged livings for the next six months. It was done in a hurry at the end. We had already discussed it. Suddenly he wired that he was ready and that the Bishop had consented."

Phil had nothing to say. She was too much astonished for words.

"If we are both satisfied with the exchange we may make it permanent," continued the stranger. "My name is

Ainsworth. My old parish is in the East End of London. I am very much afraid that Mr. Ringwood will not like it after the lovely air you have here."

Phil told him her name and where she lived. He seemed to understand.

"Mr. Ringwood left a message for you if you are Miss Phillis Belton. He asked me to tell you that he was very sorry that he could not call at the Old Hall and say good-bye. As I have said, he came to his decision rather suddenly and was pressed for time. But he promised to write to you as soon as he and his housekeeper could get settled."

While he had been speaking three little girls had crept out of the house and clustered round him. So pale were they that Phil could not help thinking of three white rabbits.

"These are my little daughters," he said, introducing them. "This is Rosie, the eldest; the next is Iris, and the third Violet. Imagine their delight at seeing the sea. They have never been to the seaside before. I could not afford it," he concluded simply.

"It is a real, real sea," cried Violet, her large eyes shining with excitement in her pale, peeked face. "It's not a bit like the Thames."

"Daddy took us down to the beach this morning to look at it. And we all tasted it. It's as salt as salt can be," said Iris.

"And there's such lots and lots of it, all turning over and tumbling about with froth as if somebody kept stirring it," added Violet.

Phil and Mr. Ainsworth laughed.

"My wife will be here in a minute. She's busy in the kitchen," said the new Rector.

"Don't let me interrupt her. My aunt, Mrs. Oakley, will call in a day or two. Would your little girls like a run round in my car?"

The invitation was greeted with a chorus of "Ooh! how lovely!"

"Just as you are," said Phil. "No need for hats and coats on a day like this."

She opened the door of her two-seater.

"You must all squeeze into the seat by my side. I have no back seat."

They scrambled in. There was no difficulty in finding room for them, so thin were the little London flowers.

Along the cliff road they sped, never losing sight of the grey North Sea that was accounted so salt. They were bubbling over with excitement and delight.

Unknown to herself, Phil had discovered something that was to take the place of her lover.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

OLD Jane leaned heavily on the fork with which she had been feebly turning a small portion of her garden patch. It was about three o'clock in the afternoon, and Phil had looked in on her way home to tea. Although at this time the autumn was upon them, the sun was still hot to the worker on whose back it poured down.

The old woman felt herself gently pushed aside and deprived of her implement.

"You go and sit down, Jane!" commanded Phil. "I'll finish turning over the soil for you. What do you want to put in here?"

"By the rights, cabbages should be. It's time they were in," she replied with a deep sigh of relief.

"Have you got any plants?"

"Mrs. Oakley sent up three dozen from the Hall garden. Rare good ones they are, every one of 'em."

Jane limped into her kitchen and brought out an old kitchen chair. She planted it near the spot that was being dug over and settled herself solidly to watch operations.

"If you don't mind, miss, I'll set here while you're a doing of it, then I can see if that's being done proper."

There was silence for a while. Jane could never hold her peace for long, however.

"Do you happen to know, miss, where the Rector went when he took hisself off so sudden?"

"He went to London to do Mr. Aisworth's work so that the new Rector could bring his family to the seaside. Poor, pale mites! They looked as if they wanted a change."

"Go right up to the fence, miss. Don't let a mite of land be wasted. The cabbages will grow almost touching the fence," said Jane, her eyes never leaving Phil's movements. Satisfied that her assistant was doing quite as well as she herself could have done it, she went back to the subject of the Rector. "When I heard tell of him going off like that, I declare to goodness I thought that he had drowned himself, that I did!"

"Why should you think that he wanted to drown himself?" asked Phil.

"Because William, he say that the Master didn't want you to go over to the Rectory."

"The Master never said anything of the sort," said Phil with a touch of indignation in her voice.

"Maybe you give him a hint yourself that you didn't want any more truck with him?"

"Maybe I did. I say, Jane, it must be two years since you dug this ground over."

"It's all that and a bit more," admitted Jane unblushingly. She returned to the subject of the Rector's strange disappearance. "Ain't he a-coming back again?"

Phil ceased her strenuous work for a few minutes and took a rest. The soil was caked for need of the spade after the summer heat.

"Not that I know of. If he does come back, it won't be at my invitation," replied Phil. "We shall do very well with Mr. Ainsworth in his place."

"Happen you're right there. Not but what I didn't like Mr. Ringwood. He give me that there frock I'm wearing on Sundays and my new bonnet. He did say something—at least I did—about new boots. Mine are getting that shabby I fare ashamed of 'em. Now I shan't get 'em, I suppose. I'm sorry he ain't coming back."

"I think that you will like Mr. Ainsworth," said Phil, taking up the fork again.

"I don't doubt but what we'll like him," agreed Jane. "But he's got a large family, three gals and two boys, they tell me. Howsomedever, he's a nice easy gentleman. I'm thinking the boots won't matter. He won't bother us so much with his services and take on as Mr. Ringwood did when we couldn't get to church."

"I shall go just the same," said Phil as she drove the fork into the ground and put her foot upon it.

"You're young, miss. And the Hall pew have got comfortable cushions. Lawk! I got pins and needles last time that bad in my behind, I could have shruck out with the pain of it. It went down my back right to the calves of my legs."

Again there was silence except for the ring of the fork when it struck the ground. Jane was the one to speak.

"Next time don't let that be a parson what take your fancy."

"Mr. Ainsworth has been to see you, hasn't he?"

"He's come in now and again and is always friendly-like. He seem one of the right sort. I showed him my bad leg."

"What did he say to it?"

"He says: 'Jane, I have seen wuss.' 'Was that up London way?' I axe him. He says: 'Yes, she was a pore thing. She was laid up with her bad leg six mortal years.'"

"What became of her?" asked Phil.

"At last she took and died."

"That's done!" cried Phil as she hoisted up the last forkful of soil, turned it over and beat it into crumbling mould.

"Now for the plants. Where are they?"

"Down there by the water-butt. There's a little owd watering-pot close by. That leak, but I've stopped up the hole as well as I can with a bit of mutton fat."

Phil brought them to the bed. It did not take her long to plant out three dozen seedlings.

"Set 'em in tight, miss, or the wind'll draw 'em right out of the ground."

"There, Jane," said Phil as she pressed her knuckles round the roots of the last. They'll come in as nice spring cabbages next March."

Jane rose from her chair and inspected the patch more closely. "That'll do. You've done that right nicely," she said with approval. "There ain't nothing you can't do if you put your mind into it. You'll make a rare good wife some day."

"I'm not going to marry at all. Never! So that's that!" cried Phil. "I've had enough of this marrying business. I'm going to be like Uncle Dick and stay single."

"Don't go for to say that, miss. You don't know what you'll do till the time comes."

"I can always say no. And I'm going to say it all along the line," cried Phil vehemently.

Old Jane cackled as she led the way into the cottage, carrying the chair with her.

"You come in, miss, and set you down to rest a bit. You must be tired after all that digging. I want to tell you that it ain't of any use talking like that. When Mr. Right comes along——"

Phil hastily interrupted.

"There's not going to be a Mr. Right, I tell you, Jane, and I know."

"Just you listen here, miss. Marriage is like a thunderstorm. You know how a tempest comes up all unexpected. The wind may be in the West. Up the tempest will come from the East. Or if the wind is in the East, like as not that blow up from the South. All at once that will begin thundering and carrying on as you never see. If you don't run for shelter you're cotched, and there you are!"

"Not I, Jane!"

"You can't help yourself. You can't get on without 'em," said the old woman firmly.

"Yes, I can. You'll see!"

Jane shook her head unconvinced.

"A woman may earn a man's wages nowadays. She may wear them breeches and all that. But she can't have children if she don't let a man come into her life. There's many women in these days what could do without a man and glad, except for that. She may set and think as hard as she likes, but she can't make herself a mother without his help. That's just where you're cotched same as with a tempest."

Jane was not the only one who was anxious to discuss the question of the broken engagement. They all had something to say on the subject. No one had any blame for either the one or the other of the two lovers. The general opinion was that Mr. Ringwood was frightened of her, as they called it. He feared lest the Rectory buildings should be "mucked up," as they termed it, with cows and pigs and fowls of all sorts, creatures which he heartily detested as being sources of noise, bad smells and mud.

Mrs. Merton, of the dairy shop, had already treated her husband to a full version of her opinion. She only waited for Phil to give her the opportunity of saying what she thought of the affair. She opened the subject with a question.

"Can you tell me, miss, begging your pardon for asking, why did the reverend divine run away?"

Phil laughed and did not reply immediately. She knew what was at the bottom of her mind. She knew that Mrs. Merton would not be content until she had expressed her opinion. As Phil did not speak but only laughed, the other continued:

"I doubt it was that there car of yours. You must have given his reverence a turn more than once the way you druv.

I'm sure I saw him go white sometimes as he set by your side."

"I don't think he was afraid of my driving."

"Then it must have been them there breeches that scared him. My husband always said that they would be too much for the reverend gent," said Mrs. Merton with the intense satisfaction of someone who has solved a knotty problem.

"Couldn't have been," declared Phil. "I was careful to change whenever I thought I should be likely to see him."

"All the same, miss, he knew that you wore them."

"I don't see that it had anything to do with him what I wore when he wasn't present. He might as well have objected to the pyjamas that I wear in bed."

"Happen he would!" responded Mrs. Merton dryly. "It's curious how men don't care to see women in breeches. I believe they would liefer have 'em go stark naked."

Phil thought it was time to turn the conversation. She was getting heartily sick of the subject of men and their likes and dislikes. She had determined to put them out of her life altogether. The two uncles would suffice to represent the class without her coming into closer contact with any outsiders.

"Have you seen my three new little friends, Mr. Ainsworth's daughters?"

"Yes, little dears they are! They have such nice manners. They come in here every morning for a drink of milk on their way to school. Mr. Belton, he says I'm to let 'em have as much as ever they can drink over the counter for a ha'penny each. They put down their money and thank me so prettily for giving them such good measure. You should see 'em lap it down. Cats isn't their match by a long way."

Although Belton gave the order it was at Phil's suggestion that the privilege had been granted.

Then it was Betsy's turn. She had a good deal to say. It was a matter of immense satisfaction to the old dairy-woman that there was no immediate prospect of losing Phil. She had learnt to depend on Phil's judgment whenever anything like a crisis occurred in the dairy or milking-shed. The master's niece could shoulder any amount of responsibility. The opportunity came, and Betsy held forth.

"So you've given up his reverence. To tell you the honest truth, miss, I'm right glad you're staying on at the Old Hall. I don't know what we should have done without you. You're

young yet, and you don't want to be thinking of a husband for another seven or eight years."

"I don't wish to think of a man ever again. More trouble than they're worth!" Phil replied hotly.

"You may well say that, miss! I didn't marry till I was twenty-nine. For eight mortal years I walked out with Abram. Then one day after harvest was over and he'd made a nice little sum, he say: 'Don't you think it's time we got married?' 'You don't want to be in a hurry about it. Haste only puts you into a sweat,' I say. Well, he had the banns put up the very next Sunday as ever was. I lived with him over forty year and had nine children. Five of 'em lived and four died. You're only twenty, miss. Plenty of time for you to do as well as I did."

"Betsy, you have seen the new Rector's children," said Phil, once more switching the conversation off a subject that she was beginning to hate.

"Yes, miss, and little dears they are! They follow you about like your shadder. They're a-picking up your ways and talking same as you. I see their mar have put 'em into the same dress as you wear when you're out on the land."

"I did that. They made themselves into such an awful mess tramping after me in all weathers that I bought a roll of thick khaki drill and got the village sewing-woman to help me to rig them out in no time. With their thick boots and woollen golf stockings they're fit to go wherever I can go and take no harm."

"What's their par say?"

"That I have saved their lives with the open country air they get with me. He was seriously afraid that another hot summer in London would have killed them."

"Quite as likely as not," assented Betsy.

Caroline, resting a few moments from the scalding out of many milk pans, was listening with an approving grin. Phil turned to her.

"What do you think of my little friends, Caroline?" she asked.

"If you please, miss, they're three little masterpieces in them there breeches, that they are!"

And Phil agreed.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

THE months passed. Another Christmas came, a merrier one than the year before. Phil had opened out the old play-room again, and it once more rang with merry young voices.

Mr. Ainsworth's three little flowers were growing sturdy and robust on Norfolk air. They no longer resembled white rabbits. If Phil wished to liken them to anything she called them her Norfolk dumplings.

They had dropped into a regular routine in which their education was duly considered. Every morning they went to the lady who acted as their daily governess. They came back to the Rectory for midday dinner, and when it was over they got through the tiresome preparation which they did not love.

Then came the change from a kind of school uniform to the delightful land-girl's dress. Free for the rest of the day, they scurried off to join Phil. More often than not it meant a scrumptious—as they termed it—tea in the play-room of the Old Hall. They had the place to themselves and were not invaded by the grown-ups.

On an afternoon late in April the trio of small land-girls met Phil on their way to the Old Hall. She had been looking at a field reserved for hay where once Old Hemp had lost his temper over the removal of his harem to the milking-shed.

"Oh, Phil, look!" cried Rosie. "There's a man walking over our field."

By this time the children had adopted everything pertaining to the Old Hall as their own, including the uncles and aunt.

"He will spoil our grass," added Violet in an indignant tone.

"Shall we run after him and tell him he mustn't walk there?" asked Iris, always ready to take action. "He must have got into the meadow by the gap. If he wants to get up to Old Jane's cottage, he ought to keep to the fence. Look! He's going right across!"

"No, you'll tread down the grass. I'll hail him."

It was evident that the stranger had not discovered their

presence, as he would have done had he entered by the gate. She put her hands to her mouth.

"Ahoy, there You're trespassing!" she called.

He stopped and turned towards the spot from which the arresting voice had come. Slowly he made his way in a bee-line for the group. Phil stood outside the closed gate, and her three little land-girls mounted on its lower rail so as to get a good view of the intruder.

He walked slowly and with effort. He was very thin and pale, as if he had only just recovered from a severe illness. As he drew near to the gate he took off his hat and waved it. Phil had a full view of his features.

"Jim!" she cried in a startled voice.

"Dear old Phil!" was the reply which was not very steady.

"Did you know that you were trespassing on our grass?" demanded Rosie, in whose opinion Phil was not showing the sternness that the occasion demanded. It was necessary in dealing with trespassers to be very firm.

"Yes, I know. If Uncle Dick caught me, perhaps he would lay his stick across my back."

He was beginning to smile, which made him look more like the old Jim.

"What were you doing there?" asked Rosie.

"Taking a short cut to the Old Hall."

"We have shut up the path across the meadow. We have 'bushed' the grass, and the path can't be used till the hay is cut."

"You can walk by the fence if you want to go and see old Jane," said Iris.

"What has been the matter with you, Jim?" asked Phil, recovering from the shock of seeing her old chum such a wreck.

"I have been in hospital for six weeks with typhoid fever. A very bad go it was. The doctors didn't think at one time that I should pull through."

"Poor old boy! You never wrote and told us about it."

"Couldn't hold a pen, and I had no one to do it for me. As soon as I was fit to be moved my boss asked me where I should like to go for a change. I chose Beltonville. He has given me three months' leave."

"And you look as if you wanted it badly."

He climbed over the gate, taking his time about it.

"I'll come by the road with you," he said. "I had no notion that it was so far. My legs ache as if I had walked ten miles instead of barely one."

"That's because you're still weak. We will soon change all that and set you up again. You're coming to stay at the Hall in your own quarters. No one has appropriated them."

"No, Phil, no!" he answered very decidedly. "It's very good of you, but I would rather stop on at the boarding-house, where I am very comfortable."

"How do you like Manchester?" she asked presently.

"Loathe it!"

"Then chuck it, Jim."

"That's what I should like to do. There are times when I get heartsick for the country, for good old East Anglia."

"Well, why not chuck it?"

"It's a very good appointment in its way. If I can stick it I shall do very well in a few years. Just now I feel as if I shall die when the time comes for me to go back."

They tramped along in a line that filled the empty road. The gates of the Hall were not far off.

"Are you a land-boy?" asked Violet, who had taken his hand and adopted him on the spot.

"I used to be," he replied with a smile, as memory brought back the past.

"Then you must be a land-boy again and come and help us to drive old Sally and her piglets out of the orchard. They give us more trouble than the rest of the stock."

"I shall be very glad to join you if you will let me," he replied.

"Phil must make you some breeches and a tunic like ours, and we must find you a long ash stick the same as we have. You aren't fit to walk over our fields in the sort of things you have on."

They went straight to the play-room, where a substantial tea was already spread.

"You must see the uncles and aunt afterwards," said Phil, as Jim dropped, exhausted, on the cushions of one of the old, battered, cane lounges in which he had sat many a time in the old days. Even Phil, knowing him as well as she did, could not guess at the depth of his joy at being once more in touch with the familiar scenes of his boyhood.

Later on he renewed his acquaintance with Belton and the Oakleys and received a warm welcome from them.

Every day that passed saw him at the Old Hall, and the time flew all too quickly for everyone concerned. The little girls took him to their hearts as they had done Phil. His leave was nearly expired. In ten days he should be returning to Manchester.

His courage failed him. He confided his troubles to Uncle Harry. There was a long discussion among the three elder folk, who put their heads together. Perhaps they saw further into the future than did the young people. It ended by Oakley offering Jim the clerkship in his estate agency.

For some time past Mrs. Oakley had seen that the work had been gradually getting a little too much for her husband. His clerk had left him for a better billet. With the increasing number of houses that were being built yearly he badly needed an assistant—someone who was more efficient than a clerk. Here was the very man suitable for the post. Jim possessed a good, sound knowledge of office routine and the keeping of books. Being on his feet the livelong day would not affect him as it was beginning to affect the older man.

The salary was not so good as that which Jim had been drawing, nor were the prospects of the future so favourable. But this did not matter to the country-loving man. The climate was what he wanted; the fresh air that blew off the North Sea was as the breath of life to him.

He accepted Oakley's offer and severed his connection with Manchester. He settled into the rooms over the office, from which he had a clear view of the wide expanse of the grey ocean. Every spare moment—there were not many in the summer months when the place was full of visitors—was spent at the Old Hall, and Aunt Olive purred happily over her little schemes for the future.

Beltonville was increasing in size. It had crept up towards the higher ground and away from the edge of the cliff. The cliff was not more than from fifty to a hundred feet high, but its friable nature made it none too safe when heavy autumn rains fell, followed by winter frosts.

The better class of house was only half a mile from the Old Hall, and residents were being tempted to settle there. The number of visitors also increased, until it was difficult to find room for them all at the height of the season.

Lowestoft and Yarmouth drew off the trippers, and the place retained its reputation for quietude.

Some of the arable land of the farm was taken up for building, but the grazing ground remained and the rich marsh land still continued to fatten the cattle that came from Norwich Hill. Belton was well content to have it so. Ground rents proved more profitable and less trouble than corn and root crops. Cows, pigs and cattle exacted less work from the master than the sowing and garnering in of harvests.

It was not until three years later that Jim could persuade Phil to listen to his pleadings and think of marriage.

"Oh, Jim," she protested, "I am so happy with my little land-girls! I don't want to make any change or to leave the old home."

"It won't be any change that you will feel, and you've lost one of your land-girls already. The new house we're putting up for you—for us, I should say, just outside the gates of the Old Hall will seem no more than an addition to the house. You won't know that you are in a separate building."

Aunt Olive's happiness in helping to furnish the new home went far to reconcile her niece to the arrangement. Then came the question of the honeymoon.

"I can't spare more than a long week-end away from home. Daisy ought to be giving us another red-polled calf in a few weeks' time. I must be at home for that."

"And I ought not to leave the office for a longer time. Since Uncle Harry has been laid up with rheumatic gout he is too crippled to keep his eyes on the property, although he can supervise the office work as well as ever."

"Five days must do for us to pay a visit to your people in Lincolnshire. How is Rosie getting on in the office as a typist?"

"Splendidly, and I am teaching her to look after the buildings and repairs. She doesn't seem to regret her land-girl's dress."

"The other two girls are frightfully put out because I am insisting on proper bridesmaids' dresses. I've got Rosie on my side, however," said Phil with a laugh.

"What did they want to wear?"

"Breeches of white satin and tunics of blue velvet."

"And very nice they would have looked!" responded Jim.

"It would have been a kind of court costume for the land-girl. I always liked the dress, ever since you adopted it."

"Must draw the line somewhere. Mr. Ringwood, with all his fads and fancies, was quite right in keeping the land-girl out of church," said Phil. "Tunics of blue velvet they shall have, but the lower garment must be of chiffon."

Old Jane was still alive and finding as much pleasure as ever in her "bad leg." She had something to say on the subject of Phil's marriage with "Mr. Jim," as he was still called in the village.

"Didn't I tell yer, miss, that it would come like a tempest, all sudden-like? You would get cotched when you was least thinking of it!"

"Well, anyway, he's the best of the bunch!" retorted Phil.

"I ain't saying he isn't, although to my mind there ain't much to choose between any of 'em. They're all alike, these men, except in the matter of drink and carrying on with women which may come expensive."

"Mr. Jim doesn't do either."

"And bless the Lord for it. You can do anything you like with a man what's sober if you go the right way to work. But with one who drinks you can't get at him not nohow, the silly mawkin! He ain't got much sense at any time, but when he's full of liquor there's no sense left at all. I remember my husband come home one night that drunk he couldn't understand a word I said. That was my chance. I tell yer, miss, he was that bad he took and rolled down by the water-butt, and there he lay, just as he was. I had a broom handle, what I kept handy for the pigs! Lawk! I give him a rare owd hiding!"

"I wonder he took it quietly," observed Phil.

"He was too drunk to know what was happening to him, too drunk even to swear. The next morning he said to me, says he: 'I don't know what's the matter with me. I must have cotched a cold. I fare stiff and sore all over.' He was that drunk, he couldn't remember a mite of anything."

"Can they get as drunk as all that?" asked Phil.

"If they take gin on the top of beer they lose all the little sense they've got. I says: 'You shouldn't have gone and fought that there water-butt.' 'What did I? I must have thought that was owd Thompson.' 'I reckon you did. If you'll set still I'll rub you over with some lard and vinegar.'

That'll ease you.' He give me a look, but he was too duzzy to get up and call me a liar."

"Did he often get drunk, Jane?"

"Not so often as he might have done. On the whole, he was a good husband, take 'em by and large. After all, the men are as the Almighty made 'em; and that did ought to be took into account on the last day, when the wives come to be judged."

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THE village of Chessenden had passed into the hands of a wealthy proprietor of Chain Stores who aspired to fill the shoes of the bankrupt d'Eaucourts, and the purchase of Eaucourt Manor is essential to his plan. A hotel company is in occupation and has an option to buy at the end of the lease, provided the neighbourhood can raise no valid objection on moral grounds. Colonel Thatcher seizes on the opening offered by this saving clause and, in order to make Local Option effective, he sets to work to stir up public opinion.

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Author of "Written for Elizabeth", "Lady of Justice"

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EXPERIMENT UPON MURDERERS was the headline of a newspaper paragraph reporting a lecture by a scientist of world-wide repute before the "Royal Society of Arts". It arrested the attention of Margaret Crichton, a lonely lady who, owing to the slump, is confronted with extreme poverty. In it she sees a possible way of livelihood; and the story tells of the offer she made to a brilliant bacteriologist, of his peremptory refusal and later acceptance, and of an intensely dramatic situation that developed as their professional interest gave way to personal interest and love. In praise of this remarkable novel we cannot do better than to quote the opinion of our literary adviser: "Miss Morrison has produced her best novel. This is far and away better than her previous two novels, the craftsmanship being definitely improved . . . The characterization in this story is excellent and there are several dramatic scenes which are on a very high level. The story has all the characteristics of a best-seller." 7s. 6d.

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How Lord Cheyn finds her in Seville, after many months of anxious search, and how he convinces her of his love, forms the dénouement of this long novel.

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A visit to friends in the North allows her freedom from the stuffy atmosphere of Southford, the scandal-loving town where Aunt Constance lives. She meets and immediately falls in love with Mark Hadlow. For her this love was a joyous and vital thing, but Mark was fresh from a broken engagement and refused to regard it as anything but a passing fancy. A year later Mark begs her to marry and join him in Malay. The voyage provides another meeting and another passion and the sight of Mark in Malay occasions her no heart-beats, and so Enid is left to the morrow and fresh woods.

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Disastrous accident, the love of women, haphazard tragedy inseparable from that perilous country, wrought powerfully with him, till there emerged a different Black Coetzee, sadder, kinder, and wiser. The wilderness had new meaning for him, its creatures were his friends. And love and happiness at last consoled him ; he enjoyed the fruits of travail, which is simple peace and contentment in a wonderful world as God made it.

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7s. 6d.

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General Fiction

J. D. Beresford

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LOVE, says Shakespeare, is an "ever-fixed mark that looks on tempests and is never shaken", and in *The Faithful Lovers* Mr. Beresford has written a novel to show that that kind of love may be found among the young people of today. Bryan Davys and Shirley Veheyne loved at first sight and never wavered in their perfect faith in one another. She was the daughter of a country landowner and professional soldier who was made a General and received a baronetcy for his war service. Bryan was the son of an author and journalist with strong pacifist views. On top of these divergences of parental opinion the luck was always against Bryan in his relations with his lover's father. Mr. Beresford propounds his theme brilliantly and with great sympathy. He has sought, not to write the conventional love story, but to depict the life we see about us every day. Around this vivid picture of our times he has woven a moving tale of the single-hearted devotion of these two young people, who finally conquered adverse fortune after ten years' constancy to the ideal of their perfect love. 7s. 6d.

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Our "First Novel" Library

No. 54

Trevor Williams

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For a first novel this is an exceptionally ambitious effort, but it has been successful because the author understands his people so well. He has written vividly of the Welsh, their problems and their country, and in particular of a number of people who are thrown together in conflict. 7s. 6d.

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[see over]

TOUCH ME NOT—*contd.*

the additional responsibility of bringing up her three-year-old brother.

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